

Secularism and Phrenology: Horace Mann, George Combe, and James Simpson

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Abstract:

While recognizing Horace Mann's commitment to phrenology, historians of American education have not explored the way in which Mann utilized physiological laws of brain structure and development to justify his many reform efforts. This paper traces Mann's conversion to phrenology and the allied doctrine of secularism, as spelled out in George Combe's *Constitution of Man*, and shows how he drew on the educational philosophy and pedagogic practices popularized by Combe's co-worker, James Simpson, in his popular lectures and annual reports.

I look upon Phrenology as the guide of Philosophy and the handmaiden of Christianity. Whoever disseminates Phrenology is a public benefactor.

Horace Mann

Horace Mann died during August 1859, just two months prior to the birth of John Dewey. 1859, of course, was also the year that Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species*. As such, not only did Mann and Dewey live during different times, their thought took shape in eras governed by radically different cosmologies. Both believed that the central problem of life was adaptation. But while Dewey -- writing in the wake of the Theory of Evolution and the upheavals of the modern urban-industrial world -- rejected all faith in moral and physical absolutes, Mann steadfastly believed in a divinely ordered and beneficent universe.¹ Accordingly, where Dewey viewed life as a creative and open-ended transaction, a reciprocal transformation "of the environment to our own activities as of our activities to the environment," for Mann, it implied the uncompromising "subjection or conformity of all our appetites, propensities and sentiments to the will of Heaven," God's providential economy of nature.²

Like most educated men of his generation, Mann learned this metaphysics from the Common Sense Realism of the Scottish philosophers Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Thomas Brown, whose writings formed the moral capstone of liberal studies in New England colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and his own *alma mater*, Brown.³ When, in the months prior to his appointment as Secretary of Education to the State of Massachusetts, Mann read George Combe's *Constitution of Man*, he found within its pages a practical guide to life under a more positivistic version of this philosophical system.⁴ Combe, the leading phrenologist of his 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 reform of criminals, Combe brought every function of the modern world order 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 one of Britain's leading advocates of public *secular* schooling and a scientific curriculum based upon Pestalozzian 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

In fact, most of the causes that Mann championed in his common school crusade (including his efforts to abolish corporal punishment, promote the object lesson, teach physiology, establish normal schools, and establish a religious curriculum acceptable to all sects) can be found in Combe's *Lectures on Popular Education* (1833) and Simpson's *Philosophy of Education* (1834), the first book Mann read on schooling after his appointment as Secretary of Education.⁷ 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. For Mann, Combe was simply "the philosopher," the greatest man of the present, as he wrote in his diary. He even named his son after him.⁸

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, which has "resulted in profound distortions of the history of education, of social and cultural realities."⁹ Similarly, while 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 this science had for reformers of the Early Republic.¹⁰ The very idea that the founding father of the American common school was a committed phrenologist appears to be something of an embarrassment to contemporary critics who remember phrenology the way Mark Twain presented it, as a fad practiced by hucksters, quacks, and charlatans.¹¹ But this unfortunate and distorted perception is more a product of

historiography than of fact. For the simple truth is that Mann's thought can no more be understood independently of phrenology than can Locke's independently of empiricism. Far from being quacks, the first phrenologists were among the most respected scientists and prominent intellectuals of the day. In particular, phrenology was eagerly embraced by leading members of the New England medical community as the physiological theory supporting the practice of moral treatment initiated by Phillippe Pinel and Samuel Tuke.¹² Having worked to establish the 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."¹³ By demonstrating how the principles of psychological management perfected on the insane could be extended to the entire community, the *Constitution* provided Mann the behavioral technology necessary to engineer his vision of a good state, the Whig ideal of a virtuous republic supervised by God's laws.

What were these doctrines about the structure and growth of the brain? How did phrenology evolve into a social philosophy? And how, given Horace Mann's political and religious convictions, did it sustain his vision of the proper aims, methods, and content of education? While a book length study would be necessary to explore these questions fully, an introductory chapter can be opened by examining how Mann's social and educational thought, as spelled out in his first lectures on education, flows directly from the *Constitution* and Simpson's application of Combe's secular philosophy to public schooling.

The Constitution of Man

George Combe converted to phrenology in 1815 when he came under the orbit of Johan Gasper Spurzheim, the former colleague of Franz-Joseph Gall, the founder of the new science.¹⁴ For Combe, a young lawyer from the middling classes who had studied physiology and philosophy at Edinburgh University, Spurzheim offered a superior anatomical description of the brain; by identifying the inner order of neural structures with the determinants of behavior, he wove a liberal vision of human nature into a compelling scientific justification for a meritocratic social order. Rejecting the gloomy doctrines of Calvinism and the privilege and patronage of aristocratic society, phrenology promised a progressive state where, under the guidance of a new moral elite (the biologically elect), institutions would utilize knowledge of the mind to mold rational and moral citizens for a life in accord with the natural laws by which God governed the world.

The brain, Spurzheim taught, was the material organ of the mind. It comprised some thirty-five distinct but interrelated faculties that could be grouped into an economy of four mental classes. At the rear and base of the head were the Propensities, nine large organs (including Philoprogenitiveness, Combativeness, and Adhesiveness)

responsible for the basic social and physiological instincts. Under the crown were ten moral Sentiments (Benevolence, Cautiousness, Conscientiousness, etc.); above and around the eyes were twelve Perceptive organs (Form, Size, Time, Color, Language, and so on); and finally, above them, the four Reflective faculties (Comparison, Causality, Wit, and Imitation) (See Figure 1 on facing page). Following received physiological principles, Spurzheim held that the size of an organ was an index of its power, and that when stimulated by its natural object -- Wit by humor and Benevolence by suffering, for instance -- the resulting exercise generated growth, strengthening the faculty for better or for worse. The great object was thus to correctly manage experience and the hereditary transmission of traits so as to ensure the harmonious development of the mind and the reign of the moral and rational powers. Incorrectly exciting the base propensities, Spurzheim argued, as so often happened to the children of urban areas, led to a life of ignorance, crime, and decadence; while overtaxing delicate organs with too much verbal learning or religious fanaticism, might result in insanity. As a child's organs matured, parents and educators had to follow the implicit wisdom of the human constitution and seek the moral norms God had written into the brain. In the hands of a wise and benevolent expert, these same laws and pedagogic techniques -- popularly known as moral treatment -- could be used to refashion criminals and cure the mad. Finally, Spurzheim also defended crainioscopy, the thesis that the size and proportion of the various organs could be measured through the contours of the cranium, thus revealing details about a person's character and talents. While the idea of reading personality from the shape from of the head may seem farcical today, the plasticity of the skull, combined with the uncanny ability of phrenologists to describe their subject's inner nature, earned them many believers, even among the scientific community of the day.

These innatist tenets provided Combe a means of distancing himself from the radical environmentalism of Robert Owen -- which was fervently promoted by his older brother Abram. After visiting New Lanark in 1819, Abram Combe opened a Cooperative Society in Edinburgh, and then, in 1825, founded a community based upon a Christianized version of Owen's socialist teachings and pedagogic principles.¹⁵ Within a year, Abram had died from over-exertion, and the effort to found a new moral world, burdened by corruption, had fallen into bankruptcy. Abram's great error, Combe wrote to his brother William, was "putting the cart before the horse."¹⁶ "To produce union and cooperation there must be harmony of principle," and this demanded "highly *enlightened* and *moralized*" individuals.¹⁷ As "reason and benevolence were to form the bonds of union, the establishment should have been delayed until, by education . . . a sufficient number of individuals had been prepared . . . for carrying their principles into practical effect."¹⁸ But if human beings were not ready for utopia, much could be done to improve society by shaping the character of the masses, especially through the infant schools first devised by Owen and later

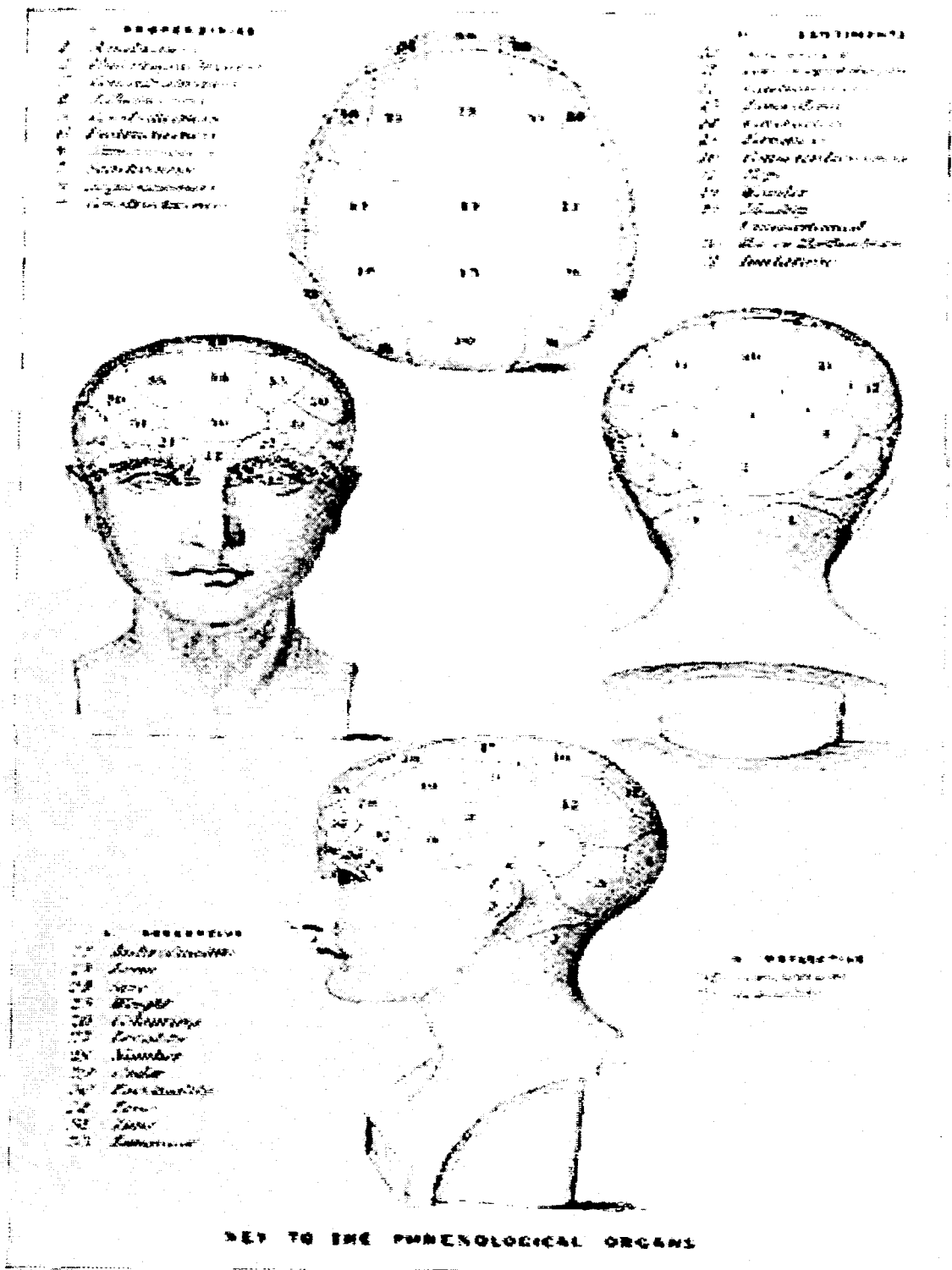


Figure 1: Key to the Phrenological Organs

promoted Samuel Wilderspin. More generally, the nation had to awaken to the truth of Abram's practical Christianity; that virtue and happiness would only be achieved when individuals followed the dictates of reason. It was this liberal faith, suitably adapted to the truths of phrenology, which Combe presented in his *Constitution of Man* as the religious doctrine of secularism.

According to Combe, a beneficent Creator had adapted human beings and the world to virtue. Every object, including the body and the brain, was crafted with a precise set of powers that caused events to follow independent, universal, unbending, and invariant laws. God had also given men and women free will and the rational faculties to understand that obedience to these laws

is "attended with its own reward, disobedience with its own punishment."¹⁹ Human beings, as Bishop Butler argued, were thus "under God's government, in the same sense as we are under the government of civil magistrates."²⁰ After considering the human constitution as revealed by phrenology, Combe drew up the fundamental axiom of his moral philosophy: those who obey God's ordinance "enjoy the intense internal delights that spring from the active moral faculties . . . while those that disobey that law are tormented with insatiable desires, which, from the nature of things cannot be gratified."²¹

The details of this naturalistic commandment had to be deceived and disseminated if people were to realize their place in God's grand design. This implied educating the population about physical, organic, intellectual, and moral laws that governed their nature. For instance, to maintain health and cultivate the mind, several hours each day had to be devoted to physical exercise and mental activity. Moral and religious experiences were equally important. The problem, Combe observed, was that society constantly disregarded this providential order -- the upper classes, adopting a sedentary life, had become indolent, slaves to the Love of Approbation and other animal propensities, while the masses, forced to labor "in habitual infringement of the important laws of their nature" had become "organized machines" rather than "moral, religious, and intellectual beings."²²

The most important of all the organic laws related to the original organization and subsequent development of the human organism. To fulfill God's design, the germ from which men and women spring must be "complete in all its parts, and sound in its whole constitution."²³ Thereafter, "as long as it continues to live it shall be supplied with food, light, air, and every physical aliment necessary for its support" including due exercise of its functions."²⁴ "If the corn that is sown is weak, wasted, and damaged, the plants that spring from it will be feeble, and liable to speedy decay."²⁵ So it was with human beings. "The feeble, the sickly, the exhausted with age, and the incompletely developed, through extreme youth, marry, and, without the least compunction regarding the organization which they shall transmit to their offspring, send into the world the miserable beings, the very rudiments of whose existence are tainted with disease."²⁶ The sins of the parents, whether resulting from ignorance or the strength of the sexual drive, were written into the very being of their children, a misery to them and a burden to society. What could be done?

First, the laws of heredity had to be understood. Here Combe identified a progressive mechanism of inheritance. Recognizing that "mutations" and "other additions to, or abstractions from, natural lineaments of the body" are not transmitted to offspring, he drew on the observations of animal breeders and numerous personal anecdotes to support the Lamarckian formula that "the qualities of the children are determined jointly by the constitution of the stock, and the faculties which predominate in power and activity in the parents, at the particular time when the organic existence of each child commences."²⁷

How else could the differences between children of the same parents be explained? One can imagine Combe's fears when he considered how many children were conceived while one or more of the parents were intoxicated. Parents alert to their Christian duty would recognize the importance of "preserving the habitual supremacy of the moral sentiments and intellect" once they realized that by so doing, "improved moral and intellectual capacities may be conferred upon the offspring."²⁸ It was also common knowledge that the first offspring of a young marriage "inherits a less favorable development of the moral and intellectual organs, than those produced in a more mature age." This was a particular concern of Combe's, for in Scotland at that time women were allowed to marry at 12 and men at 14 -- phrenology taught that the higher powers did not evolve for another ten years!²⁹ Combined with the dangers of inbreeding and the negative effects of combining people of different temperaments and cerebral organization, the eugenic laws were of the utmost importance to the future of the race.

Having identified many of the conditions that promote well-formed progeny, Combe turned his attention to nurture, and the steps parents and society should take to ensure the full and healthy development of each child, including advice on the proper care of the fetus and the infant. What most interested him, however, were the moral laws, the codes by which nations regulated the behavior of citizens. The scientific approach to morality consisted in determining how social practices and institutions undermine the perfect cerebral order, reinforcing, as in Calvinism the animal propensities over the moral and intellectual organs. Ultimately, in politics, as in religion, individuals that support different codes "must necessarily be deluded by the imperfections in their own minds."³⁰ The whole of history could thus be regarded as a mental progression, from savagery, barbarism and superstition -- the rule of the animal organs -- to the level of Christian civilization, brought about by the ascendancy of the higher powers. Material conditions had radically improved through the application of science; it was now time to realize the happiness that would result by implementing a similar knowledge of the moral world. Individuals who understood the rewards and punishments attendant upon the natural laws would be in a better position to calculate their personal good; the different classes would learn to work in a social and economic system that promoted the well-being of all; and nations, so long at one another's throats would learn the advantages of justice and cooperation.

What angered Combe the most was the way in which the higher classes mistreated the working poor. God had not intended the masses to be turned into instruments for gratifying the propensities of property owners. They too were rational and moral creatures deserving the same opportunity to realize their nature as Christian beings. But after "exhausting their muscular and nervous energy . . . for ten, twelve, and some even fourteen hours a day" there was no time or energy for moral and intellectual pursuits.³¹ The craving for alcohol this state excites leads to the

strengthening of the lower organs, an animal nature that is then inherited by their children leading to increased levels of crime and social degeneracy -- the whole situation being exacerbated by the cycles of poverty and growth brought about by an out of control economy. There is little wonder that in this nested situation, individuals should grow up self-serving and callous, at war with the world and themselves.

Rectifying this sad state of affairs meant placing politics, legislation, education, morality, and religion -- all social institutions -- on a sound philosophical basis. But such a transformation could not be achieved overnight. As the failure of Owenism and other utopian schemes demonstrated, change would be a gradual affair. Improving humankind demanded the alteration of the mind, and this would take generations. A start had to be made by teaching God's laws to the young:

Their minds, not being pre-occupied with prejudices, will recognize them as being congenial to their constitution; the first generation that has embraced them from infancy will proceed to modify the institutions of society into accordance with their dictates; and in the course of ages they may at length be acknowledged as practically useful . . . a perception [which] . . . will lead to their observance, and this will be attended with an improved development of the brain, thereby increasing the desire and capacity for obedience.³²

"Education," Combe asserted, was "valuable in the exact degree in which it communicates such information, and trains the faculties to act upon it."³³ And yet "reading, writing, and accounts," the subjects which made "up the instruction enjoyed by the lower orders, [were] merely *means of acquiring knowledge* . . . [they] do not *constitute* it."³⁴ Likewise, "Greek, Latin, and mathematics which are added in the education of the middle classes, are still only *means of obtaining information*; so that with the exception of the few that pursue physical science, society dedicates very little attention to the study of the natural laws."³⁵ All this had to change. The only impediment to achieving such a Christian community of happiness and virtue was "the sectarian religious instructors of mankind," whose opposition, he feared, might "retard, by a century, the practical adoption of natural laws, as guides of human conduct."³⁶ If only, he pleaded, divines could accept phrenology as the philosophy of Christianity, abandon the catechism, prayer, and other superstitions and degrading rituals, and consecrate their lives to the practical business of perfecting men and women a moral, intellectual, and religious beings.

The *Constitution*, as Combe described it, was "an introduction to an Essay on Education." People, he believed, broke the laws of nature either out of ignorance or because of their inability to control the force of their animal propensities. *Instruction* would address the first problem, providing knowledge of facts governing nature; *training*, the second. Ideally, these ends would fuse in a

single process that led to a "knowledge of our creator, of ourselves, of external nature, and the formation of those habits of religious, moral, and intellectual enterprize and activity, which are indispensable to the evolution of our faculties, and the performance of our parts with intelligence and success."³⁷ On one hand, therefore, Combe stressed the importance of a scientific curriculum, on the other, moral and intellectual discipline tailored to the distinctive character of the brain. The traditional economy of memorization, classical languages, and physical punishment was replaced by child-centered schooling that stressed understanding, positive knowledge, and the pleasure that learning brings when the mind's faculties are exercised appropriately.

James Simpson and the Necessity of Popular Schooling

Although Combe wrote several articles and lectured extensively on these views during the 1830s, it was his co-worker and fellow founder of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society, James Simpson, who most thoroughly and convincingly applied the logic of phrenology to education -- a cause he and Thomas Wyse took to the nation in an unsuccessful attempt to advance secularism as the solution to the religious problem besetting British education.

Like Combe, Simpson was convinced that the root cause of Britain's social problems lay with the ignorance of the masses. Physically plagued by feeble constitutions and perpetual sickness, intellectually "creature[s] of impressions and impulses," and morally unable "to restrain their . . . propensities, or to call forth, cultivate, and exercise their moral sentiments," he found the lower classes "not greatly more under the guidance of reason than . . . inferior animals."³⁸ This condition, moreover, was being compounded every generation by the laws of heredity. In only "a few generations," he cautioned, "the stock, the very source of such a population" would be "extinguished."³⁹ Yet he was optimistic that with appropriate training and instruction, children of the working poor could develop their innate powers and acquire the knowledge necessary to lead a healthy, intelligent, and virtuous life. Scotland, of course, already had parochial schools for the poor, but when Simpson examined their curriculum he found the entire focus to be on language and the instruments of learning. Was this education "of a kind," he asked rhetorically,

to impart useful practical knowledge for resource in life; does it communicate to the pupil any light upon the important subject of his own nature and place in creation; on the conditions of his physical welfare, and his intellectual and moral happiness; does it, above all, make an attempt to regulate his passions, and train and exercise his moral feelings to prevent his prejudices, suspicions, envyings, self-conceit, vanity, impracticability, destructiveness, cruelty, and sensuality? Alas! No. It teaches him to READ, WRITE, and CIPHER, and leaves him to pick up all the rest as he may!⁴⁰

An education tailored to human powers and needs had to start in the home and continue in the infant school. Between two and six, he observed, "feelings are incomparably more easily bent and moulded to good . . . than in after years . . . [when] their effectual culture is, in many cases, nearly hopeless."⁴¹ Heeding Amariah Brigham's warnings about overtaxing the delicate structures of the growing brain, Simpson was careful to assure his readers that in the Edinburgh Model Infant School, children's "studies varied with healthful exercise and constant amusement, story, song and fun; nothing like a task annoys them, and they obtain, without an exertion, much fundamental knowledge to serve them for life."⁴² The correct management of the faculties demanded a knowledge of physiology. Parents and teachers had to understand that

The LAW OF EXERCISE IS OF UNIVERSAL APPLICATION. It is a fundamental law of all nature, that ALL the capacities of man are enlarged and strengthened by being used. From the energy of a muscle, up to the highest faculty intellectual and moral, repeated exercise of the function increases its intensity. The efficiency of the blacksmith's right arm and of the philosopher's brain depends upon the same law. The bodily force, the senses, the observing and reasoning faculties, the moral feelings, can only be improved by habitual exercise.⁴³

Applied to physical health, this meant children should receive a balanced diet and a proper regimen of activity in a clean well-ventilated environment. In moral education, the sentiments had to be trained to regulate the propensities. As soon as they could walk, infants were to be grouped in miniature societies under the guidance of moral superintendents. Encouragement would then be given "to the practice of generosity, mercy, kindness, honesty, truth, and cleanliness in personal habits" so as to ensure "all occasions of quarrel, cruelty, or fraud, or falsehood" were "minutely and patiently examined into . . . and the moral balance . . . restored."⁴⁴ All "indelucacy, filthiness, greediness, covetousness, unfairness, dishonesty, violence, cruelty, insolence, vanity, cowardice, and obstinacy" would be "repressed by all the moral influences of the community," and "no overt act," however trivial, would "ever be passed over."⁴⁵

Intellectual education would also begin during infancy as children learnt to discriminate the objects and events of their environment. Carefully nurturing the organ of Wonder, teachers were to encourage the child's exploration of the world -- words, like reading and writing, being introduced as instruments to further this natural process. To extend and systemize the child's knowledge, Simpson turned to the object lesson, meshing Charles and Elizabeth Mayo's Pestalozzian lessons with the needs of the unfolding faculties.⁴⁶ Children would exercise their perceptual organs by observing the basic qualities of objects and bring into play the faculty of Comparison by

classifying things according to their resemblances and differences. There was no place for either the Calvinist economy of fear and punishment or the Utilitarian regimen of places and prizes: phrenological pedagogy demanded that all learning be tied to the natural appetites of the mind and supported by the law of kindness.

Between seven and fourteen years of age children would attend a common elementary school where, Simpson believed, it was practical to expect them to acquire knowledge that would equip them for work and the enjoyment of their leisure. It would provide "just notions of social life" necessary to regulate future views and render the student "an enlightened and willing co-operator with yet higher intellects, in plans for the general welfare."⁴⁷ Once they understood God's laws of nature, mind, and society, the working classes would surely work hand in hand with the higher ranks for the common weal. Eschewing the classics, Simpson advocated a largely scientific and secular curriculum. Extending from the earlier object lessons, Mayo's later courses would be used to trace the industrial processes by which raw materials are transformed into socially useful products, an exploration of the physical world that led seamlessly into Chemistry, Geography, Mechanical Science, Geometry, and Natural History. Psychological, social, and moral laws would be investigated through Physiology, Civic History, Political Economy, and the rudiments of Phrenology. Above all, he demanded, "pupils . . . *must* become natural theologians," able to appreciate "the exquisite order and beauty" of nature's laws, and understand how "the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator . . . inhere in every part of the stupendous fabric."⁴⁸ God had adapted men and women to virtue, and future citizens had to understand that following this moral order was the only path to human happiness.

The first step in the implementation of Simpson's scheme was the establishment of a Board of Education. Able to draw upon the latest intelligence from home and abroad, this governing body could disseminate improved pedagogical methods through a "Code of Instructions," and standardize the curriculum with textbooks adapted to the needs of the community, "with a special eye to the elementary education of the children of the manual labour class."⁴⁹ It would also oversee the erection of schools for children in every parish, and, following the example of Prussia, set up a ring of normal schools around the country. Financed initially from government funds, schools would then be maintained by local rates. At this point the Board would turn to management, supervising the training of teachers and monitoring the performance of schools through the reports of local officials and its own cadre of inspectors. In such a well-regulated system, Simpson was confident that teaching, once viewed with disdain, would become a socially valued profession, offering intellectual rewards and the promise of public service to a new generation of talented and eager young men. As in Germany, he would only allow women into the elementary classroom as assistants. This was perhaps the only position on which he differed from Horace Mann.

Phrenological Mann

Invested with no formal authority, only the power -- to quote from the official charge -- "to diffuse as widely as possible throughout every part of the Commonwealth, information of the most approved and successful methods of arranging the studies, and conducting the education of the young," the position of Secretary was hardly a promising move for Mann.⁵⁰ Quite why he would give up his political career and lucrative legal practice for such an indeterminate role has been the object of much debate. Traditionally historians have cited his benevolent spirit; more recently, revisionists have painted him as a zealot determined to maintain the status quo at a time of enormous social change. But this psychological accounting has uniformly overlooked Mann's own intentions and the influence of Combe's moral philosophy which captivated Mann's imagination at the very time he was drawn into the cause of education. According to Mann's journal, on May 18th, 1837, Edmund Dwight nominated him to the Board and pleaded with him to become its first secretary; on May 25th, he spent the day reading "that most valuable book, 'Combe on the Constitution of Man;'" and on May 27th, he greeted the official announcement of his membership in the eight-man body by recording his sense of the gravity of the important work that lay before them. Over the next few days, his thoughts reveal a growing awareness of the relationship between schooling, civic order, the passions, and virtue. When his building was fire-bombed on the 30th, he questioned "is it possible that such things could be, if moral instruction were not infinitely below what it ought to be?"⁵¹ On June 11th, as members of Boston's Irish community rioted, he considered the dangers of the untrained mind to the Republic.

The educated, the wealthy, the intelligent, may have a powerful and decisive voice in its formation; or they may live in their own selfish enjoyments, and suffer the ignorant, the vicious, the depraved, to form that public opinion. If they do the latter, they must expect that the course of events will be directed by the licentious impulse, and that history will take its character from the predominant motives of action.⁵²

Even his legal work raised questions about truth and the contest of emotions. By the end of the month, his mind was set. He had chosen the path of usefulness and dedicated himself to "the improbability of the race."⁵³ "My jurisdiction has changed! I have abandoned jurisprudence and betaken myself of the larger sphere of mind and morals. Having found the present generation composed of materials almost unamenable, I am transferring my efforts to the next. Men are cast-iron; but children are wax."⁵⁴

As even a cursory reading of Mann's work reveals, the rekindled enthusiasm his wife spoke of went hand in hand with a religious awakening, similar to Combe's, in which the laws of mind and nature were seen as the key to reconciling a benevolent God with the evils of

life. Mann's biographers rightly emphasize the impact of his adolescent rejection of Calvinism (after the drowning of his elder brother), and his crisis of faith during the 1830s (following the tragic loss of his first wife). In the depths of his grief, Mann struggled mightily to restore a sense of meaning to his world. Phrenology, it seems, played a part in this reconstruction, transforming his educational cause into a religious mission, and the role of the Secretary -- as he frequently described it -- into that of a martyr. Sacrificing his worldly goods, his reputation, even his health, he would use the same laws that cured the deranged minds of the mad to engineer virtuous and rational citizens, and so realize, in America, the kind of practical faith Combe had pictured in the *Constitution*. Phrenology, as Mann neatly described it, would be the handmaiden of Christianity.⁵⁵

The Secretaryship may have had little formal power, but armed with the truths of phrenology, Mann was an irresistible force. Turning to Simpson's *Philosophy of Education*, Edgeworth's *Practical Education*, and then to an array of articles advocating the use "apparatus . . . thus substituting real for verbal knowledge," he spent much of June familiarizing himself with the new pedagogy and the issues facing the state's common school system. No reading could have been more "delightful," he reported, "nothing more congenial with all my tastes, feelings, and principles."⁵⁶

The legislature had charged the Board with just two duties, preparing an annual abstract of the common school returns, and reporting their deliberations on how the condition and efficiency of the state's system of popular schooling might be improved. The secretary's role, "under the direction of the Board," was to collect these facts and help diffuse, "as widely as possible, throughout every part of the Commonwealth, information of the most approved and successful methods of arranging the studies and conducting the education of the young."⁵⁷ The Board promptly assigned its first task to Mann and, after deliberating about how he might fulfill the second, came up with the scheme of holding educational conventions in each of the State's 14 counties. To be attended by local teachers, friends of education, leaders within the community, and whichever members of the Board were available, Mann would deliver a lecture and stage debates on important educational topics.

After composing his first lecture in July, Mann spent the best part of August arranging his upcoming tour -- printing circulars and soliciting the help of local officials and prominent sympathizers. By the end of the month, he was ready for his first official duty. Travelling to Worcester, he addressed the annual meeting of the American Institute, and, a few days later, staged his own opening convention. The influence of Combe and Simpson was simply unmistakable.

After describing the events that lead to the establishment of the Board, Mann opened his first lecture by spelling out the basic metaphysical assumptions underlying Phrenological theory. "The entire succession of events, which fills time and makes up life," he explained, "is nothing but

causes and effects."⁵⁸ God had given human beings the power of reason so that they could understand these laws and "foresee the future consequences of present conduct."⁵⁹ Nowhere was this more evident than in the development of a child's character. Noting that "all forms of direct and indirect education, affect mental growth," he explained that "the mobs, the riots, the burnings, the lynchings, perpetrated by the *men* of the present day, are perpetrated because of their vicious or defective education, when children."⁶⁰ For, "by an irreparable law of Nature," not only were "the iniquities of the fathers . . . visited upon the children, onto the third and fourth generation," but the "ignorance" and "neglect" of parents "whelped and suckled" the "tiger-passions" that generated such "havoc."⁶¹ "Education," he continued, "demanded a scientific acquaintance with mental laws," in particular, the paramount rule that "acquirement and pleasure should go hand in hand."⁶² God had given the brain an instinctive appetite for learning, so teachers, like gardeners, had to follow the "voice of Nature" by tailoring the physical, intellectual, and moral environment of the school to the implicit wisdom of the learner. Not only did this imply improving the furniture, heating, and ventilation of school houses, but, he reasoned, "school studies ought to be arranged, as to promote the harmonious development of the faculties."⁶³ Following this "natural order and progression" prevented "precocious growth" and the dangerous consequences that follow from cultivating organs in the wrong sequence -- as the verbal learning and abstract "rule" lessons of current teaching practices did.⁶⁴ In place of words, learning had to commence with the senses: by manipulating objects that please the eye and spark curiosity, building from concrete to abstract, general truths would be grounded in a knowledge of experience rather than mere sounds.

Throughout the lecture, Mann returned time and time again to the use of punishment as a means for maintaining discipline. Like Combe, who experienced great brutality as a schoolboy, Mann had a deep personal aversion to Calvinistic child rearing practices and the vicious treatment of children in the traditional classroom. He was equally opposed to emulation. Given that the propensities acted independently of one another, he recognized, as Simpson had argued, that "the intellect may grow wise while the passions grow wicked."⁶⁵ Teaching children to prize knowledge for material gain would only make "man" a slave of his instinctive desires: "the noblest part of his nature -- his moral and social affections, held captive in the retinue."⁶⁶ In a Republic where government was based upon the principle "that every man, by the power of reason and the sense of duty, shall be fit to be a voter," education had to imbue "the minds of children with a love of pure and beautiful things" and produce "godlike men who can tame the madness of the times, and, speaking divine words in a divine spirit, can say to the raging of human passion, 'Peace, be still;' and usher in the calm of enlightened reason and conscience."⁶⁷

By the second week of November, his lecture tour complete, Mann got down to the formidable task of composing an abstract from the hundreds of school returns that filled his office. Presented before the Board on January 1st, 1838, his *First Annual Report* unfolded the same areas

of concern that had driven the debates at his conventions, principle among which were two initiatives -- finding schoolbooks written "to supply children at an early age, with simple and elementary notions of right and wrong in feeling and in conduct, so that the appetites and passions, as they spring up in the mind, may, by a natural process, be conformed to principles, instead of principles being made to conform to appetites and passions," and ensuring the competence of the state's teachers.⁶⁸ "Teaching," he asserted, "is the most difficult of all arts, and the profoundest of all sciences."⁶⁹ In its "practical sense, it involves a knowledge of the principal laws of physical, mental, and moral growth, and of the tendency of means, not more to immediate, than to remote results."⁷⁰ But sadly, supply had answered demand, and the public had gotten the teachers they were willing to pay for. Without knowledge of the machinery with which they worked, armies of incapables were flowing from the schools.

In the first quarter of 1838, Mann persuaded the Board to pursue these two initiatives. Nathun Capen, the publisher of phrenological texts, would issue fifty books to commence a school library -- Mann pushed to include the *Constitution* -- and, with the aid of a \$10,000 gift, the State would establish the country's first three Normal Schools. Gaining such control of the means and content of education was not going to be easy, and, by the end of the year, he was deeply embroiled in a religious and political struggle that very nearly resulted in the termination of the Board. Mann's ability to weather these disputes, and carry both measures forward, is a testament to his legal ingenuity and the persuasiveness with which he wielded phrenological theory and secular logic. Whatever the official charge of the Board, by 1841, Mann had achieved *de facto* control of education in the state, and set up a petty bureaucracy to carry his reforms into practice.

Mann explained his objectives for the Normal Schools most fully in his second lecture, "Special Preparation, a Pre-requisite to Teaching," attended by Combe at the second October convention in Taunton. After recounting the trials and achievements of the past year, Mann began his lecture by celebrating the establishment of the State's first Normal School in Lexington and discussing the training that future teachers ought to receive. Extending Combe's views on the social duties of women in a different direction to Simpson, he drew attention to the distinctive character of the female brain, and asked,

is there not an obvious, constitutional difference of temperament between the sexes, indicative of a prearranged fitness and adaptation, and making known to us, as by a heavenly imparted sign, that woman, by her livelier sensibility and her quicker sympathies, is the fore chosen guide and guardian of children of a tender age?⁷¹

Women, Mann answered, had a "high and holy mission" to "breathe pure and exalted sentiments into young and tender hearts."⁷² But such work had to be based upon knowledge

of the developing mind -- "the laws of organization and of increase." In contrast to empiricist philosophers, he did not believe that "a difference in education is the sole cause of all the differences existing among men," rather, "certain substructures of temperament and disposition, which education finds, at the beginning of its work, and which it can never wholly annul."⁷³ "The contrasts among men result, not from the possession of a different number of original faculties, but from possessing the same faculties, in different proportions, and in different degrees of activity."⁷⁴ This could be seen clearly, Mann believed, in the customs of civilized and barbarian races, and indeed the different "intellectual and moral classes" of society.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, Mann cautioned, an "appalling truth" had to be faced; "every child born into this world has tendencies and susceptibilities pointing to the furthest extremes of good and evil."⁷⁶ While "that wise and good man" Samuel Woodward was able to "tame the ferocity of the insane . . . and restore them to the guidance of reason" -- indeed, "can do this not only to one, but to hundreds at a time," Mann observed, "we apply these obvious principles, to everything but the education of our children."⁷⁷ As a result, the "ignorant and passionate teacher will turn a hundred gentle, confiding spirits into rebels and anarchists."⁷⁸ When some "subject-faculty, some subordinate power . . . unfortunately inflamed or . . . unwisely stimulated by an erroneous education, grows importunate, exorbitant, aggrandizes itself, encroaches upon its fellow faculties, until, at last, obtaining the mastery, it subverts the moral order of the soul, and wages its parricidal war against the sovereignty of conscience within, and the laws of society and of Heaven without."⁷⁹ Witness, Mann argued, how the over development of the appetite for "nourishing beverages" had led men and women "into the seething hell of intemperance;" Acquisitiveness had produced misers; Ideality slaves to fashion; and Self-esteem, people -- most notably politicians -- consumed by "pride, conceit, intolerance."⁸⁰ Teachers had to understand that "all the faculties have their related objects, and they grow by being excited to action through the stimulus or instrumentality of those objects."⁸¹ As Simpson had argued, so Mann continued, "the blacksmith's right arm the philosopher's intellect, the philanthropist's benevolence, all grow and strengthen according to this law of exercise."⁸²

Eschewing verbal learning and the traditional curriculum, Mann directed teachers to train the mind's various organs while providing useful knowledge. "Nature, science, art" offered "a boundless variety of objects and processes, adapted to quicken and employ each of the faculties." The perceptive powers would be "exercised in the correctness of observation" and the reflective organs in "comparison and judgment."⁸³ Turning to the moral sentiments, Mann drew his lecture to a close by assuring his audience that "in the education of children, *motives are everything, MOTIVES ARE EVERYTHING.*"⁸⁴ Neither the fear of punishment nor the promise of reward could serve the purpose of moral education, for "stimulating a child to the performance of actions, externally right, by appealing to motives

intrinsically wrong," ultimately sold the child into the bondage of propensities such as *destructiveness* and *self-esteem*. Children had to learn the greater happiness that results from acting out of higher motives. Accordingly, Mann concluded, Normal Schools, "by study, by discussion, by practical observation" had the task of disseminating "the art and science of teaching" so that those young women charged with nurturing the delicate souls of children would understand how to "touch the right spring, with the right pressure, at the right time."⁸⁵ Given this digest of phrenological theory and practice, it is hardly surprising that Combe would write excitedly to his brother that he had never "listened to a more sound, philosophical, comprehensive, practical, eloquent, felicitous composition."⁸⁶

The two men became instant and devoted friends. They vacationed together in Cape Cod, toured the Mississippi Valley, and during Mann's 1843 visit to Europe, they reunited in Germany. Their correspondence was frequent and detailed, and reveals the many ways in which they relied upon one another to further their respective reform causes -- Combe, for example, promoted Mann's achievement in Massachusetts as the key to resolving the religious question in Britain. A final sense of Mann's commitment to Combe's teachings can be read from the conclusion to his famous *Seventh Annual Report*, where, mirroring Combe's phrenological "Address to the American People," he offers his estimation of the Old World by analyzing the "the different forms into which humanity has been shaped by different institutions."⁸⁷ His prognosis was bleak. He saw "whole classes of men and women, whose organization is changing, whose whole form, features, countenance, expression, are so debased and brutified by want and fear and ignorance and superstition, that the naturalist would almost doubt where among living races of animals to classify them."⁸⁸ "No truth can be more certain than this," Mann continued,

that after the poor, the ignorant, the vicious, have fallen below a certain point of degradation, they become the increasing fund of pauperism and vice, -- a pauper engendering hive, a vital self-enlarging, reproductive mass of ignorance and crime. And thus, from parent to child, the race may go on, degenerating in body and soul, and casting off, one after another, the lineaments and properties of humanity, until the human fades away and is lost in the brutal, or demonic nature."⁸⁹

Not prepared to advocate negative eugenic engineering -- there were "tribes of the human family, whose existence," he asserted "we may not wish to see continued, provided always, that they dwindle and retire in a natural way, and without the exercise of violence or injustice to expel them from the Earth" -- Mann resigned himself to the unpalatable truth that "to re-edify the frame, to rekindle in the eye the quenched beam of intelligence, to restore height and amplitude to the shrunken brow, and to reduce the overgrown propensities of the animal nature within a manageable compass" would require centuries of life under moral and material laws.⁹⁰

Fortunately, the situation in America was quite different. "In many respects," Mann argued, the colonization of the New World "was like a new creation of the race."⁹¹ The pilgrims who survived rigors of climate and a barren coastline to found a society grounded in common sense and the word of God effectively established a physical, intellectual, and moral bloodline that advanced "humanity at least one thousand years."⁹² Mann called upon his readers, as stewards of this inheritance, to fulfil their duty by adopting "a more earnest, a more universal, a more religious devotion of our exertions and resources, to the culture of the youthful mind and the heart of the nation," in short, the advancement of the American society toward a moral Republic through a common education grounded in scientific laws of the mind.

Conclusion

Mann was driven by a proto-eugenic philosophy in which the physiological laws of phrenology would be used to elevate men and women into more Christian beings. Asylums, schools, prisons, institutions for the handicapped, the abolition of slavery, and the other reforms he championed were all underwritten by the single goal of promoting the physical, intellectual, and moral powers God had crafted into the human constitution -- sickness, crime, the barbarism of savage peoples, and even poverty being simply the causal results of violating this natural ordinance. Not everyone was created equal, but in Mann's reformed Calvinism the biologically elect -- the wise and benevolent men of science -- had the religious duty to redeem their less fortunate brethren and establish a form of government that would improve all individuals. As in the phrenological view of mind, where reason and morality are trained to guide the passions, so in Mann's Christian Republic, the guardians would structure society around God's laws, elevating citizens through education and self-culture, and, in the case of the deviant or degenerate, restoring this order through moral treatment and paternal management.

¹ The world, 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." "He finds the earth 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." Horace Mann, *A Few Thoughts for a Young Man* (Boston: Tickner, Reed, and Fields, 1850), 38-39.

² John Dewey, *Later Works, 1925-1953* 17 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981-1991); Horace Mann, *Lectures on Education* (New York: Arno Press, 1960), p. 118.

³ See Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Medical and Moral Philosophy, 1865-1861*

(Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

⁴ George Combe, *The Constitution of Man: Considered in Relation to External Objects* (Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1834).

⁵ On Combe's educational thought see William Jolly, ed., *Education, Its Principles and Practices as Developed by George Combe* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1879); and Stephen Tomlinson, "Phrenology, Education, and the Politics of Human Nature: The Thought and Influence of George Combe," *History of Education* 25 (1996): 235-254.

⁶ Horace Mann quoted in Jonathan Messerli, *Horace Mann: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 351.

⁷ George Combe, *Lectures on Popular Education, Delivered to the Edinburgh Philosophical Association for Procuring Instruction in Useful and Entertaining Science, in April and November, 1833* (Edinburgh: J. Anderson, 1837); James Simpson, *The Philosophy of Education, with its Practical Application to a System and Plan of Popular Education as a National Object* (Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1834). The second edition was published under the title *The Necessity of Popular Education*.

⁸ George Combe, *Notes on the United States of North America, During a Phrenological Visit in 1838-9-40*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Maclachlan & Stewart, 1841).

⁹ Harold Silver, *Education as History* (London: Methuen, 1983), 22.

¹⁰ Lawrence Cremin, *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1957), 14.

¹¹ While acknowledging Mann's commitment to phrenology, and providing a useful record of his correspondence with Combe, Messerli does not explore how Mann utilized physiological laws of mind and behavior to justify his many reform efforts. Michael Katz only mentions phrenology in passing, while David Hogan confuses "affectionate authority" with moral treatment and forwards a Lockian account of mind that Mann specifically rejects, along with all forms of empiricism. Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968); David Hogan, "Modes of Disciplines: Affective Individualism and Pedagogical Reform in New England, 1820-1850," *American Journal of Education* 99:1 (1990): 1-56.

¹² The best introductions to phrenology in Britain are Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and David De Guistino, *The Conquest of Mind: Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought* (London: Croom Hill, 1975); and in the United States, John D. Davis, *Phrenology, Fad, and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955).

¹³ Mary Peabody Mann, *Life and Works of Horace Mann* 5 vols, 2nd Edition. (Boston: Lee and Sheppard Publishers, 1891), 59.

¹⁴ Gall's objective was to develop a physiological theory of brain structure based upon comparative anatomy and

ethnology. He was cautious about crainioscopy and, unlike Spurzheim, conservative in politics and religion, believing that human nature was incapable of significant improvement.

- ¹⁵ On Abram Combe and the Orbiston community see Alexander Cullen, *Adventures in Socialism, New Lanark Establishment and Orbiston Community* (Glasgow: J. Smith and Son Ltd., 1910).
- ¹⁶ Cullen, *Adventures in Socialism*, 206.
- ¹⁷ Cullen, *Adventures in Socialism*, 206.
- ¹⁸ Cullen, *Adventures in Socialism*, 92.
- ¹⁹ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 8.
- ²⁰ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 4.
- ²¹ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 9.
- ²² Combe, *Lectures on Popular Education*, 26.
- ²³ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 77.
- ²⁴ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 77.
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- ²⁶ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 79.
- ²⁷ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 103.
- ²⁸ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 112.
- ²⁹ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 113.
- ³⁰ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 142.
- ³¹ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 159.
- ³² Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 205.
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- ³⁶ Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 206.
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- ³⁸ Simpson, *The Philosophy of Education*, 12.
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- ⁴⁰ Simpson, *The Philosophy of Education*, 28-29.
- ⁴¹ Simpson, *The Philosophy of Education*, 109-110.
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- ⁴³ Simpson, *The Philosophy of Education*, 91.
- ⁴⁴ Simpson, *The Philosophy of Education*, 98.
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- ⁴⁶ On the Mayos see Kate Silber, *Pestalozzi: the Man and his Work*. (London: Routledge and Paul, 1960).
- ⁴⁷ Simpson, *Philosophy of Education*, 113-114.
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- ⁵⁰ Quoted from "Legal Provisions for the Education of the People in Massachusetts," in George Combe, *Notes*, I, p. 359.
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- ⁵⁶ Mann, *Life and Works of Mann*, I, 85.
- ⁵⁷ Horace Mann, *First Annual Report*, 6.
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- ⁵⁹ Mann, *Lectures*, 15.
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- ⁶⁸ Horace Mann, *First Annual Report of the Board of Education, Together with the First Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board*, (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1837), 58.
- ⁶⁹ Mann, *First Annual Report*, 58.
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- ⁸⁸ Mann, *Seventh Annual Report*, 187.
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