In 1841, at a Congregational church near Granville, Massachusetts, a regrettable incident occurred. A lecturer then touring New England, a man named Nelson Sizer, said he could see into people’s hearts. He offered to be blindfolded, which he was, and two men stepped forward as volunteers. Sizer touched their bodies and heads, running his hands through their hair and around their ears, alighting on particular locations, the significance of which was known only to him. The congregation waited silently. When done, he announced that the first man was “a harmonious, careful, upright man,” an assessment that appeared to please the congregation. But the case of the second man was more complicated. At first Sizer used terms such as talent and self-reliance to describe the man, but quickly his tone changed. This second man showed signs of pride and selfishness, and Sizer thought he seemed “too low in Conscientiousness to be just and honest in his dealings, and too large in Secretiveness to be open, frank and truthful.” That revelation stunned the congregation—for everyone knew that both men were “well related by blood and marriage, and had unblemished reputations.” Sizer noticed people shifting in their seats and looking “at each other and at me with round eyes.” He tried to explain. “By what is known of these men I suppose you all think I have made a mistake in the last one. If any one else had made the examination, and said the same things I should have said it must be a mistake, but I told you when you put on the blind I would give my true opinions hit or miss. Those are the indications, and I should say the same thing if I were to meet the same form of head anywhere.” He had said his peace, but he left the place full of sadness. “I regretted the occurrence, as it placed me and my subject in an unpleasant light.”

Though Sizer left Granville accompanied by unbelieving glances, it was not long before he was vindicated. Eighteen months later, he returned
to Granville and inquired about his two volunteers. As it happened, the second man had “borrowed money of many people, some of it before I examined his head,” and there were “some other seriously crooked matters which were spoken of respecting him with bated breath.” The man had left town in a hurry, probably also with bated breath, never to return. Nothing negative was said again in Granville about Nelson Sizer and his remarkable new science.  

This incident illustrates one way that Americans in the early nineteenth century experimented with new ways of understanding the self. As a science of seeing clearly the mind and spirit, phrenology had an obvious appeal for Americans in general, and religious Americans in particular. Who wouldn’t want to see clearly the inner dynamics of reason, willpower, or faith? This was true especially for Americans confounded by the morphologies of conversion prescribed by evangelical Calvinism—morphologies that included stages such as abasement, vocation, and sanctification. By the middle of the century, many were unable to see the signs of these stages in their hearts. This chapter examines how a group of religious Americans developed new discourses of spiritual progress built on insights gleaned from new psychologies such as phrenology. Beginning in this period, a broad coalition of religious liberals used these new psychologies to find in external, especially bodily, conditions signs of inner spiritual states.

UNSETTLED BELIEVERS

The early nineteenth century was a time of religious experimentation, an era dominated by the spiritual yearnings of believers alienated by their parents’ Calvinism. Nelson Sizer and other itinerant phrenologists were responding to this restlessness and helping create it, and like other peddlers and evangelists, they promoted new ways of thinking about the self and salvation. They spoke at colleges, churches, open-air meetings, poorhouses, and prisons.  

Probably the most pervasive solution to the perceived coldness of Calvinism was religious revival, which in this period gathered explosive force as both a movement for religious renewal and a forceful critique of the inherited tradition. Surveying a vast landscape of visions, dreams, and prophecies, Nathan Hatch and Ann Taves have demonstrated that Americans in this period, eager to put behind them “respectable” churches and frowning clergymen, found in Arminian religions and revival experiences new certainties about God and experience. One of them, Henry Alline, discovered that the Calvinism of his youth had deprived his soul of God’s sweet love. Now free of old constraints, his
soul was “ravished with a divine ecstasy beyond any doubts or fears, or thoughts of being then deceived.” He and others blamed Calvinist clergymen for cramping people’s minds with ordered schemes of religious experience and rigid theological systems. For such freewheeling believers, visions, dreams, and other revival-inspired illuminations were normal channels of divine guidance. “I know the word of God is our infallible guide, and by it we are to try all our dreams and feelings,” the Methodist believer Freeborn Garrettson conceded. “I also know,” he added defiantly, that “things of a divine nature have been revealed to me.” Without a doubt, Methodists and other Arminians found in revival religion release from sin and Calvinism at the same time.

But revivals also were destabilizing events, and revived believers could do unpredictable things. They might suddenly realize that old friends and ministers were corrupt and admonish (or avoid) them; they might argue that older theologies were deadening and harshly criticize them; they might pronounce old churches impure and form new ones. Foreign observers and American participants alike commented on this strange state of affairs, this chaos of come-outers, critics, and new religious movements. “Every theological vagabond and peddler may drive here his bungling trade, without passport or license, and sell his false wares at pleasure,” one observer noted. “What is to come of such confusion is not now to be seen.”

Even indigenous evangelicals such as Robert Baird, writing to counter foreign criticism, admitted that, “in some of the divisions of Churches that have taken place in the United States, men have at times permitted themselves to speak and write with an acrimony unbecoming the Gospel.” Though contending sects appeared to him as diverse “divisions of one vast army,” he admitted that Christian soldiers sometimes turned on one another. The multiplication of sects was a serious evil, he said; it rendered the churches small and ineffective, and it led to disagreeable collisions and “unbrotherly jealousy.” While Baird thought that on “essential points there is little disputation,” he had to concede that one matter in particular divided the evangelical army—namely, “the constitution of the human mind, the analysis of responsibility and moral agency, and the old question of ‘fate and free-will.’” Without a doubt, the period’s volatile religious discussions grew out of this main concern of all revivalists—personal religious experiences and how they worked. Even an apologist for the revivals could see opinions on these matters had dangerously multiplied.

In the end, then, there was a doubleness to revivals, for though they gave spiritual comfort they also could take it away. Even the Calvinism of foreign-born Scots such as Alexander Campbell could be unsettled by
America’s rough-and-tumble atmosphere. Reflecting on his seven years on the frontier, Campbell wrote that during “this period of years my mind and circumstances have undergone many revolutions. . . . I have . . . renounced much of the traditions and errors of my early education.” Elsewhere he remembered that his “mind was, for a time, set loose from all its former moorings. It was not a simple change: but a new commencement[;] . . . the whole landscape of Christianity presented itself to my mind in a new attitude and position.” Others endured similar anxieties. Confused by the contradictory theologies promoted by different sects, a son of the great evangelist Lyman Beecher also felt his mind gradually becoming “intensely unsettled.” In the 1850s he slipped deeper into uncertainty. Still others, such as the Methodist La Roy Sunderland, were bewildered by dissonant voices, human and divine, projecting themselves outward from revivals. He was vexed in particular about ecstatic experiences—how and why people had them. Like others he would journey toward liberalism and its ways of interpreting experience.

OUT OF ORTHODOXY

Those journeying toward liberalism followed diverse paths in and out of Calvinist and Arminian groups but shared a sense of loss and a consciousness of their own spiritual failure. Almost all of them had failed to experience conversion in its prescribed forms. This meant of course that these Christians were interested in critiquing the old-time religion (usually evangelical Calvinism) and experimenting with alternatives. The discourses of critique and reform they produced were characterized by a common set of preoccupations: acute fears of a distant or wrathful God; inability to produce (or discover within) a sense of sin; and unusually high levels of confidence in the natural rhythms of nature and the powers of human nature. If we include a few other notions, such as a belief in God’s immanence and a more individualistic and experimental religious attitude, we have a serviceable definition of the religious liberalism of this period. It is worth probing this liberal style for a moment to see how it contributed to the formation of new discourses of experience and spiritual assurance.

Liberal complaints about youthful anxiety were so frequent that they might seem meaningless tropes, but as Michael McGiffert has said of Puritan religious narratives, repetitive discourses can powerfully reshape the self and inner experience. And so we might begin by considering liberal complaints and their ominous pronouncements concerning orthodoxy. Undoubtedly, religious liberals missed few opportunities to...
deride offensive doctrines being delivered by coldhearted Calvinist doctors of divinity. The Unitarian educator and phrenologist Horace Mann remembered his childhood minister as a “man of pure intellect, whose logic was never softened in its severity by the infusion of any kindliness of sentiment. He expounded all the doctrines of total depravity, election, and reprobation, and not only the eternity, but the extremity of hell-torments, unflinchingly and in their most terrible significance.” Of course, the precise sources of Mann’s fear lay not just in the prevailing Calvinism but also in the ways young liberals misunderstood, reacted to, and worried about that system. Imagining only the darker implications of Calvinism, glossing its doctrines as cruel and spiritually deadening, Mann was representative of the larger group. His childhood minister presented the doctrines matter-of-factly, he recalled, but “in the way in which they came to my youthful mind, a certain number of souls were to be forever lost, and nothing—not powers, nor principalities, nor man, nor angel, nor Christ, nor the Holy Spirit, nay, not God himself—could save them.” Surely he, or his parents or siblings, would go to hell. “To my vivid imagination, a physical hell was a living reality, as much so as though I could have heard the shrieks of the tormented, or stretched out my hand to grasp their burning souls.” Liberals across the spectrum—from free-preaching frontier Universalists and Congregationalists to urbane Unitarians—thought Calvinism promoted an unhealthy piety that made believers hopeless and mentally unstable. Different symptoms resulted—an infirm body, poor mental development, depression, insomnia, insanity. Perspicacious believers escaped before severe sicknesses set in, but even milder affections could be recalled later with resentment. “The dinners I have lost because I could not go through ‘sanctification,’ and ‘justification,’ and ‘adoption,’ and all such questions, lie heavily on my memory,” one recovering Calvinist remembered. “I do not know that they have brought forth any blossoms. I have a kind of grudge against many of those truths that I was taught in my childhood, and I am not conscious that they have worked up a particle of faith in me.”

In point of fact, Calvinist doctrines were intended to produce an anxious alertness, an unsettling conviction of total sinfulness. Only after achieving this state could one learn to rely entirely on God; one had to wait, plead, and supplicate, and hope for God’s intervention. Though feelings of worthlessness could put believers through harrowing psychological exercises, these emotions also laid the groundwork for compensating moments of comfort. This was so because abasement was an important inner sign that God had (already) saved you. Thus, the deeper
the anxiety about abasement, the more certain believers might be that they were saved. These were the paradoxical comforts of perceiving the depths of your own worthlessness.

The trouble for liberals was that they could not master these alternating rhythms of abasement and contentment. They could not feel the depths of their sinfulness, and they thus could not start the process of conversion. This led to a different kind of anxiety—an anxiety that resulted not from a conviction of sin but from an inability to achieve this conviction. We can see this clearly in the life of someone like Andrew Jackson Davis, who, before becoming the famous spiritualist and seer, was a Presbyterian-turned-Methodist with a mind “painfully agitated” about a number of spiritual questions. As a youth he prayed to become aware of his sinfulness—and hoped that a conviction of sin might create hope and salvation. His pastor did his best to help.

After being in this state of suspense for a long time, the residing and much esteemed Pastor came one day where I was engaged at my work, and inquired:

“Well, brother Davis, how do you feel?”

“Very well, Sir,” said I.

“No, no, I have reference to your spiritual welfare—have you made peace with your God?”

It seemed impossible to answer. I never have had any disturbance with him in all my life, thought I.

Didn’t he fear God? Didn’t he worry about sin? Quickly his pastor gave up—”O, unconverted youth, I fear the day of grace is past. I fear you will be damned forever!’ On thus saying, he turned and left me. O, reader, can you imagine my thoughts, as he closed this sentence? The love of my nature was chilled into the coldest hate.”15 In moments like these, Christians like Davis gave up not on salvation but on the possibility that Calvinist notions might get them there.

Davis’s cold hate propelled him in novel directions, as we will see; but the impulse to rethink experience proceeded along more ordinary paths as well, unsettling some even in the religious mainstream. Most of Lyman Beecher’s remarkable children participated in this process. Catharine’s revolt, played out in a fascinating correspondence with her father, has been analyzed elsewhere,16 but the anxieties of her brother Henry Ward speak more clearly to the issue at hand—namely, why unsettled believers turned to new psychologies. Henry Ward shared emotional problems with Davis and his sister Catharine, and though Catharine comforted him by insisting that “you are not required to
feel or to do anything that your willing or choosing will not secure,” Henry Ward brooded. He had been chary of open rebellion and had joined his father’s church, but in college a spiritual darkness descended, and he reviewed “the almost childish experiences under which he had joined the church, as possibly deceptive,” trying and disciplining “himself by those profound tests with which the Edwardean theology had filled the minds of New England.” Had he found inner dispositions of total sinfulness? Without them, could he proceed legitimately? “A black despair was the result,” Harriet remembered of this time in Henry’s life, a despair that, like Andrew Jackson Davis’s, resulted not because he had found a deeply sinful nature but because he had not. When Henry Ward consulted the president of the college, one of his father’s friends, Henan Humphrey, the man misunderstood the sources of Henry’s sadness. He congratulated him, saying that “his present feelings were a work of the spirit,” and that Henry “should not interfere.” So Henry continued to wait for abasement, and the spiral of “blank despair” quickened. His spiritual failure, he remembered, “came near [to] wrecking me; for I became skeptical, not malignantly but honestly, and it was to me a matter of great distress and anguish. It continued for years and no logic ever relieved me.” “During all that time,” he confided to his sister, “my mind was intensely unsettled in theology.”

People in this situation had a choice—either they could admit that they had not produced the characteristic emotions of faith, or they could rethink how the whole process worked. Many were inclined to do the latter, gradually developing, as Henry Ward did, “a very different mental philosophy from that of the framers of theology.” This new mental philosophy was based on natural philosophy and new physiological studies, both of which raised the possibility that the world, and the self, were not fallen at all, or fallen only in a restricted sense. These new mental philosophies stressed the beauty and order of the universe, and they drew on the natural sciences and romantic and natural theological glosses on them. Beecher, and many others, drew on Coleridge—and Paley. “I am delighted in studying the doctrines lately . . . and, in reading in science, in nature. I am searching for comparisons and analogies and similar principles to unfold, explain, and confirm the various truths of Scripture,” he wrote. This too was part of his liberation from Calvinism. Other liberals as well—Emerson and other Transcendentalists, Andrew Jackson Davis and other Spiritualists, Horace Bushnell and other Christian romantics—sought correspondences between the natural and the spiritual worlds. And others came, haltingly at first, to trust intuitions that nature, and human nature, if seen correctly,
might be “a symbol of invisible spiritual truths.” The natural world was attuned to divine things.

It was not difficult to move from these convictions to new ideas on that most perfect of all created things, human nature, and how human nature might symbolize divine realities. Excited by this possibility, many turned to physiological studies to explore theological questions about mind and spirit and how they worked in regeneration. God could remain transcendent, but tokens of his nature could be discerned in the forms of the human body, and especially in the human mind. “Human nature,” one liberal wrote, “illustrates divine nature.” “Divine attribute [sic] corresponds to our idea of human faculty. The terms are analogous.” Beecher for one believed that the physiology of the brain corresponded to the faculties of the mind, which in turn corresponded to the attributes of God. The correspondences were laid out for him in the science that attracted him above all others, a new physiological science called phrenology. As a system of correspondences that localized spiritual and mental capacities in regions of the head, phrenology hypothesized that the brain was the organ of the mind; that the brain was made up of distinct parts, each of them serving task-specific faculties; that the size of the different parts of the brain indicated the relative strength of the faculties they served; and that mental faculties could grow or atrophy depending on whether they were used. (Localizing mental capacities in this way was a possibility developed much earlier in physiological studies, alluded to by Paley, and, in the nineteenth century, explored by different schools of anatomists and physiologists, including the Austrian anatomist Franz Joseph Gall [1758–1826]). Beecher allowed this psychology to displace older mental philosophies; it became a new starting point. “My pride is a little humbled,” he admitted, writing to his sister, “when I think that my great things are too small to be as first principles with father.” Nevertheless, he concluded, “I mean to continue, for by such labor the subject is to my own mind expanded and made plain.”

Of course minds thus made plain were not the same minds mapped out by earlier, more orthodox believers. These psychological traditions were new discoveries. Those journeying out of orthodoxy embraced them as such, using them to find new capacities within themselves and better ways of thinking about how these capacities worked. Many finally found confirmation that they had natural abilities to perceive spiritual things. One young man, learning about phrenology from a friend, was surprised to realize that “he possessed at least an average amount of natural talent.” This discovery caused “a new light” to break upon his mind and he “began
to see that, as ignorant as he was, he had formerly underrated his abilities. He resolved to commence the cultivation of his mind at once.” An expert phrenological examination, conducted by none other than Nelson Sizer, added to his confidence. His religious views changed entirely, for while he “formerly regarded his Maker as a mere tyrant, whom it was almost impossible to please,” a God that sought “every opportunity to discover a defect in our conduct,” he now saw clearly that these were symptoms of a “dark and benighted mind.” He saw good possibilities in himself and corresponding qualities in God.27 Other believers unable to work themselves into convictions of their sin (or out of them) embraced phrenology for similar reasons. The young Elizabeth Cady Stanton was terrified about salvation and caught in a paralyzing conviction of her inability. Though she somehow mustered a moment of joyful conversion, her relief, according to her, was cut short by Charles G. Finney’s incessant harpings on “the depravity and deceitfulness of the human heart.” Had her heart fooled her into thinking she was saved? How could she know? Only an encounter with phrenological studies by Gall, Johann Spurzheim, and George Combe released her from not knowing what to do or whether she could do it. Another young man, a student at Harvard Divinity School named James Freeman Clarke, saw clearly the ways that phrenology aided stalled believers. “One of the real benefits of [my study of phrenology] was that it inspired courage and hope in those who were depressed by the consciousness of some inability.”28

But phrenology helped struggling believers in other ways. If it convinced some that powerful spiritual faculties existed in the self, it attracted others for another reason: It brought the mysterious inner dynamics of the self to the surfaces of the body, where these dynamics could be more easily observed and understood. In short, it made inner, invisible things visible again. “If . . . we can know the condition of the physical organism at any time, we can determine therefrom the condition of the mind,” one enthusiastic Universalist wrote. In this new procedure lay “the mysterious pathway to the court of the soul.” Others agreed that without the new psychological sciences everything else was “conjecture, speculation, theoretical abstraction.” Another religious liberal said it plainly: as a guide to regeneration and practical spirituality, the older metaphysics were impenetrable.29 The ambitious maps of mind and spirit that these believers produced—the busts, charts, and inventories of spiritual powers—are eloquent testimony that those confounded by the messy inwardness of Calvinism no longer wished to grope in spiritual darkness.
On the face of it, liberals formulating new discourses of the self were doing what believers had done for centuries—borrowing ideas from mental philosophy to think about theological problems. But scientific psychologies like phrenology represented a new kind of mental philosophy, and borrowing from these psychologies resulted in formulations that also were new. To be sure, in the early nineteenth century, older philosophical traditions rooted in Christian theological concerns were giving way to mental philosophies that related human mental, emotional, and even spiritual life to physiological—especially neurological—processes. Phrenology was a part of this broader impulse in transatlantic culture. The principal stimulus behind this impulse was the professionalization of the medical sciences and the rising prestige of biological explanations of human life in general. By the middle of the century, this prestige was appropriated by influential social scientists like Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain, thinkers investigating the human neuromuscular system and how it influenced cognition, feelings, and to some extent, beliefs. Bain in particular wanted to collapse physiology and psychology, seeking what he once called in a letter to his friend John Stuart Mill the “physiological basis of mental phenomena.” These phenomena included religion, though Bain recognized the complexity of belief, explaining that it was caused by feelings, mental processes of association, and the physiology of muscular and nervous activity. Even with these caveats, however, it was clear that these more physiological psychologies linked mental and spiritual realities to material phenomena; Bain’s widely read textbook, The Emotions and the Will, for example, pointed out that belief had its “basis and ultimate criterion” in physiological activities. The presupposition behind the work of Bain and Spencer was one shared with phrenologists—namely, that different emotional and mental capacities could be localized in different physiological structures. In fact, Bain and Spencer both took phrenology seriously, entering into sustained arguments about particular mental faculties and how they might be localized.

Scientific debate over phrenology continued until just after the middle of the century, when other physiological psychologies emerged and replaced what suddenly seemed an outdated and speculative science. But phrenology lingered longer in popular culture, its categories and assumptions continuing to inform lay discourses on mind and personality. One historian has remarked that by midcentury “phrenology held a place in the American mind not unlike that occupied by psychiatry in the 1930s”:

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its terminology and tenets entered the language of daily conversation; it proved a convenient means of summarizing behavior and character in literature; and it offered a vocabulary of divine-human correspondence that undergirded art and painting in particular. Its reach into American literature was extensive. Sometimes literary references were superficial and humorous—as in Melville’s discussion of the phrenology of the white whale in *Moby Dick*—and sometimes more substantial, as in Caroline Lee Hentz’s 1869 popular novel *Eoline*. Hentz filled out her principal characters with appropriate cranial topographies: one character’s vocational choice—she was a schoolteacher—was vindicated by a phrenological consultation which demonstrated that “her organs of Self-Esteem and Firmness were, indeed, most wonderfully developed.” Walt Whitman was perhaps the most famous borrower, using phrenological categories to understand himself, his generation, and his art. He kept his phrenological chart until the end of his life and published it five times with *Leaves of Grass*. It was a good thing he did; the phrenological language the book contains is hard to handle without it.

Works by Bain and Spencer, and other major phrenological texts, were discussed in religious and secular magazines, and these works were cited and reviewed in the major Christian periodicals. It is clear that phrenology attracted audiences with a broad range of religious convictions, from Mormons and Adventists to Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. Though there were exceptions, most positive reviews appeared in periodicals sponsored either by liberal denominations, mainline denominations rapidly becoming liberal (e.g., Congregationalists), or groups espousing a popular rationalism. In general, discussion about phrenology was more active in places dominated by evangelicalism (and evangelical offshoots), probably because the issue of religious experience mattered more in these contexts. If there was one group that embraced phrenology without hesitation, it was the Universalists. Confirming basic ideas about the goodness of human nature and the universality of salvation, phrenologists bolstered Universalist criticisms of orthodoxy and abetted rationalist approaches to experience. While Universalists enthusiastically embraced this new spiritual science, reaction in other denominations was mixed. Positive reviews were more likely in popular periodicals; professional theologians writing in approved journals could be cagey, and they usually took notice of the unseemly “excesses” and sensational demonstrations of crusading lecturers like Nelson Sizer and Edward Zeus Franklin Wickes, of whom more will be said later. In any event, religious interest in the new science was considerable.
American believers embraced phrenology as a scientific alternative to the unsettled spiritual categories of American sectarianism. Ways of thinking about mind and spirit proliferated in contradictory patterns; newer, scientific psychologies overcame contradiction and doubt. Henry Ward Beecher urged “the study of man from the scientific side,” preaching early and late in life that one of the most promising developments for religious people was the “founding of mental philosophy upon physiology.” Linking the mind to the physical world—to a world of reliable facts and predictable laws—brought a new kind of certainty. Older systems had succeeded one another in vertiginous arrays. He was dizzy. Others complained of similar forms of spiritual vertigo. Horace Mann said early in the century that he was “a hundred times more indebted to phrenological [sic] than to all the metaphysical works I ever read,” pointing out that the “principles of Phrenology lie at the bottom of all sound mental philosophy, and all the sciences depending upon the science of the Mind; and all of sound theology too.” The Unitarian reformer Samuel Gridley Howe, the liberal physician Charles Caldwell, and in the last quarter of the century, the erudite Boston Unitarian James Freeman Clarke all agreed that phrenology was a significant improvement on older systems. For his part, Clarke was willing to repeat old liberal encomiums to phrenology even as new physiological psychologies displaced it. Phrenology had revolutionized mental philosophy, he wrote, for “metaphysics, a doubtful, uncertain study heretofore, with small practical results, at once became interesting and adapted to daily use.” To be sure, Americans like Clarke were merely repeating discourses initiated by phrenology’s European founders. No longer was the mind lost in darkness and indeterminacy. One could look at it; one could feel it.

In these ways, and for these reasons, believers embraced phrenology as an objective foundation for piety. Taking “the Bible for his chart in theology; Christ as his pattern in divinity; and Phrenology as his guide in Philosophy,” the well-known Universalist writer George Weaver, for example, promoted phrenology because it linked subjective realities to objective ones. “The great error with past metaphysicians, has been, in neglecting to acquaint themselves with the material connections of mind, and through these to seek an acquaintance with the principles of mentality.” “There can be no doubt,” Weaver insisted, “that every exertion of the intellect, every flight of the imagination, . . . every feeling of sympathy, every emotion of joy or pleasure, calls into action some portion of the physical organism.” The mind and spirit manifested their powers in the brain and nervous system in particular. Weaver saw as inescapable the conclusion...
that the “mind does manifest its states and changes through the material organism with which it is united,” and reasoned that, if we “can know the condition of the physical organism at any time, we can determine therefrom the condition of the mind.” The state of the body, and especially of the brain, “opens the passage that leads to the sanctuary of thought and feeling.” “The mysterious pathway to the court of the soul,” he said, had “been made plain.”

SCIENTIFICALLY SORTING SINNERS AND SAINTS

The end result of this kind of reasoning was a dramatic reworking of the practical matters of religious experience—how to have one, and how to tell if yours was genuine. While for Weaver it was enough to argue and prove that “mind or spirit . . . molds matter,” and that therefore the brain was an index of the mind, others were interested in practical matters. How might phrenology help Christians understand how to gain and sustain faith? How might it help them better understand the dark, confounding spaces of their inner lives?

Using diagrammed busts of George Washington as illustrations, the Unitarian educator John Hecker brought those confounding inner spaces to the surface by mapping conversion onto the physiological self (see figure 2). Like other phrenologists, Hecker localized “spiritual faculties” in the upper regions of the brain, intellectual faculties in the midbrain, and instinctual and sensuous faculties near the bottom. Depravity, sin, disorder, and animality were associated with the dominance of the lower faculties; this was our “fallen nature.” Regeneration and spiritual insight were associated with higher faculties. Against deists like the European phrenologists Combe and Spurzheim, Hecker argued that believers had to proceed through spiritual stages that resembled old-time morphologies of conversion. He pointed out that the “spiritual group [of faculties] is not predominant in activity” until energized by the Holy Spirit; that some kind of abasement was required to begin regeneration; that abasement led to an experience of passivity; and that therefore the Holy Spirit, when it entered the mind or brain, was the active force. When the Holy Spirit acted on the brain in this way, it united and harmonized discordant relations among the faculties and strengthened our higher, spiritual faculties. With self-culture, those faculties came to be the dominant forces in the brain.

Hecker’s was a middle position not uncommon in America, a call for a new spiritual science located between the anticlerical deism of European phrenologists and the antimodern sentiments of American evangelicals.
who rejected phrenology vociferously. His way of producing this middle position involved borrowing orthodox nomenclatures and altering their significations. For instance, the abasement he talked about was a natural capacity lodged within us. It could be stimulated, trained, and cultivated in a way that allowed human beings to participate actively in generating the proper baseline emotions. So what at first appears to be an emphasis on passivity turns out to be a spirituality of activity and control. Phrenologists like Hecker were caught in this tension—a tension between accepting the
Holy Spirit as an active force and wanting to regulate spiritual dynamics more precisely. Still, the imperatives of personal development and social progress moved individuals like Hecker toward more liberal formulations of older spiritual dilemmas. He stressed human abilities, the beauty of human nature, moral activity, and self-culture. The moment of regeneration itself was less a moment in which grace was given, and more a moment in which God reshuffled and harmonized existing faculties. As this happened, believers could use natural abilities—they could cultivate religious emotions throughout the process, feelings like meekness, abasement, “religious impressibility,” and moral sensitivity. These inner abilities also could be stimulated by various mental and physical exercises. And finally, the dynamics of conversion could be measured with certainty by attending to the shape of one’s head. “The external manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit, in conduct, physiognomy, mien, bearing, language and expression, enable the observer to examine religion objectively.” This was the sine qua non of the believing phrenologist’s position: You could map the physical contours of spiritual processes that eluded you. Hecker’s formulations were similar to those promoted by key figures in the movement, including Orson Fowler, Lorenzo Fowler, and Samuel Wells.

Though liberals could compromise with orthodoxy, they were uninterested in temporizing on certain issues. The doctrine of total depravity was one of these. On this issue they delighted in subverting cherished older formulations. (Their frustration on this matter, and their impatient denunciations of the dynamics of sinfulness, probably had their origins in youthful evangelical failures, as we have seen.) Though the mood in Orson Fowler’s key phrenological journal and in his popular religious publications is moderate, there was no way to be a phrenologist and a believer in total depravity. Anticipating that his opinions on “the constitutional elements of the sinfulness of sin” and the “causes and cure of human depravity” would be “directly in the teeth of all prevailing notions of this subject,” Fowler pointed out that his notions were “founded in Truth” and “built upon facts,” and that these facts revealed (as they did to Spurzheim and Combe) that “no [mental] faculty is constitutionally bad,” that every faculty “as originally constituted, is good and right, and that the legitimate exercise of any and every faculty, upon its own appropriate object, and in a proper degree, is virtuous.” The highest level of spiritual development was represented by a natural equilibrium in which all the mind’s faculties, each in its proper place, worked harmoniously together, and in which the mind’s organs of “marvellousness” and “veneration” were cultivated.

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Like Hecker, Fowler retained older words like *sin* and *depravity* and wholly redefined them. On this issue he insisted that human beings were sinful “not because they have *depraved faculties*, but because they make a *depraved use of good faculties.*” All human beings partook in this disorder or depravity. “Phrenology certainly recognizes, in the fact that the natural exercise and function of all [each person’s] faculties are more or less perverted and distorted in nearly or quite all mankind.” This formulation made some form of redemption necessary, but the redemption that Fowler had in mind was not a sudden change in the nature of the faculties—all of them already were good—but a change in how they were organized and how their energies were directed. Conversion was God’s way of reorganizing the relative strengths of mental faculties, stimulating moral and religious faculties in particular until they became dominant, and energizing those faculties so that they might organize all mental activity. Conversion “consists simply in the *spiritualization* of our natures already pointed out, the main medium of which is [the faculty of] marvellousness. By operating upon this faculty and organ, it extends the range of its action so as to quicken benevolence, veneration, hope, conscientiousness, and the whole moral group; and that gives them ascendancy over the propensities which we have already shown to constitute virtue, the product of which is ‘joy in the Holy Ghost,’ moral purity, and consequently happiness.” Fowler’s emphasis on spiritual faculties, intuition, and natural balance was reproduced by many others—the Beechers, the Protestant reformer (and grandfather of J. P. Morgan) John Pierpont, James Freeman Clarke, and itinerant lecturers of the sort who visited Granville, Massachusetts, in 1841.45

Of course the most powerful phrenological innovation had nothing to do with theories of sin or the self, but with practical ways of clearly seeing inner experience. Was it possible now to discern certain signs of inner changes? Did the Spirit’s activity in the brain change the head physically? A writer for the African American *Christian Recorder* thought it logical that a change as dramatic as conversion might result in physical changes. “I cannot pretend to describe all that change, but I am of the opinion that this emotion rises higher and seems so sweet and new, not only because it is from God and inspired by such grand themes, but also because in its bursting forth it effects some physical change.” Conversion was a new growth, a new exercise of the brain’s faculties, a truly new birth. This writer offered some evidence, not as proof, but as a legitimate subject to consider. He said that “it is the testimony of all, that in conversion a perceptible change occurs, a change that can be felt.” It was common for converts to say that “something seemed to come down and strike me right on the top of my
head and run all over.” Some said that “a ball of fire seemed to strike me on the top of my head,” or that “the Spirit seemed to touch me on the top of the head.” Might these sensations be caused by “the breaking away or releasing of these organs of the brain into joyful exercise?” The top of the head was, after all, the location of the spiritual faculties. Finally, this writer suggested that the permanence of the change might be explained by a physical change undergirding it.46

While popular phrenologists could debate whether and how Christians who had been regenerated by the Holy Spirit were reshaped physically,47 most of them agreed that the outer body, and especially the head, somehow showed signs of saving inner emotions. They also learned to perceive signs of counterfeit experiences, deception, and hypocrisy. Exposing crooks, criminals, and religious fakes is a common theme in phrenological literature. When lecturing in churches, for instance, phrenologists took opportunities to assess the religious merits of ministers and church officials. One phrenologist discovered an enormous organ of Acquisitiveness (greed) in a Methodist minister; he was a thief, and he later admitted as much.48 Others were surprised to find similar proclivities in outwardly pious preachers. In one shocking public examination of a deacon who handled the church’s business affairs, a phrenologist found the man to be “grasping and selfish, but smooth and inclined to be tricky in his dealings.” Onlookers gasped—but they were persuaded when this deacon disappeared with all their money. On other occasions, itinerant phrenologists advised churchgoers and church officials about their personality deficits and helped sort sinners from saints.49

Triumphantist stories circulated about seeing clearly the inner self. Many of them dramatized the victory of new, scientific certainties over older superstitions. Few of them match those of an outspoken former Baptist minister from Vermont, Josiah M. Graves. After lecturing in a Middletown, Connecticut, church, Graves had himself blindfolded and then offered to perform readings. He happened to have an uncle in the congregation, a temperance man and deacon of the church who was “regarded as a model in most things by every person in all that region.” Someone thought it would be amusing to have Graves’s uncle step forward, and the uncle obliged. Josiah Graves had a peculiar way of examining people that included vigorously rubbing different parts of the head and sampling resulting odors. Being a temperance man, Graves was interested in particular in detecting the liquor habit, which he did “by rubbing the organ of Alimentiveness” (appetite) and smelling his fingers. He reproduced the procedure on his uncle, to titters of laughter, and announced, “This man
drinks!” Shouts of laughter. “He drinks rum, brandy, something hot and alcoholic!” The audience laughed mostly at Graves’s eccentricities, but his uncle, feeling the heat of the spotlight, became angry. How could his nephew accuse him of such things? “Now, uncle, I smell the odor of dead liquor when I rub your organ of Alimentiveness, and I believe you have taken liquor within forty-eight hours. On your honor now, in the presence of this painfully silent audience, tell me, have you not taken liquor within forty-eight hours?” After a moment, Graves’s uncle admitted he “had a bad turn of colic night before last, and I got up at 12 o’clock and took some brandy and cayenne pepper to relieve it.” The audience erupted. Temperance advocates gasped. Everyone else laughed at the embarrassing and anomalous spectacle.50

If these stories dramatize the power of phrenology to read properly one’s inner states, they also demonstrate the bravery and skill of a new class of teachers and preachers. Phrenologists willing to tell the truth had a lot to lose—and some of them became prophets without honor in their own countries. One newspaper told of a traveling phrenologist who first lectured to a large audience and then examined the head of a “stout, two-fisted fellow.” “Sir, your phrenological developments are those which belong to an infamous villain—destructiveness and combativeness enormous, conscientiousness very small, and all the moral and reflective region perfectly contemptible,” the phrenologist reported. All the man lacked, he continued, was an “opportunity to become a rascal.” With that, the man rose and “by a well directed blow with his fist, knocked the Doctor flat upon the floor.” Collecting himself, the phrenological doctor announced to a stunned audience that here was “the strongest proof of the truth of phrenology I have ever seen in the entire course of my career. The villain has proved every word I told him to be the truth.”51 Such stories incorporated spectacular and humorous elements and drew attention to intriguing possibilities. Could new spiritual sciences see within?

Liberal pastors also were intrigued by these new possibilities, using phrenology to understand personality types, spiritual difficulties, and religious experience. A range of liberal-leaning ministers was involved, including an especially strong showing among Universalists and other rural, anti-Calvinists. In 1852 the Universalist Quarterly recalled that, “when Phrenology became prevalent in our country, one could hardly enter a Universalist minister’s study, but there hung the chart, or stood the bust, like the guardian angel of the place, with the ‘organs’ all marked out and numbered on the cranium.”52 Some would physically or intellectually stimulate their parishioners’ skulls to help develop
certain faculties—of veneration, for instance. Others stopped short of this, borrowing phrenology only as a system of seeing more clearly people’s inner states and organizing them into different classifications. Henry Ward Beecher used phrenology in this way. He assigned basic phrenological texts to his ministerial students, one of whom remembered that Beecher promoted the new science as a more factual way to understand “the mysteries of mind” and experience, and as a better way of diagnosing and preaching to parishioners. Beecher assigned Combe to his homiletics students. He used phrenological insights to understand human nature and tailor his sermons to his parishioners’ needs and desires. An outspoken and popular promoter of phrenology, Beecher was challenged by Catholics, Baptists and others, especially on this issue and others related to understanding experience. In one exchange, a writer for the Catholic Herald, while not dismissive of Beecher’s claims, argued that there was another, more certain way of probing the inner self: confession. Pointing to well-known problems with phrenology, this writer argued simply that “no bumps are studied, and no characteristic is guessed at. The penitent says plainly and distinctly, ‘Thus and thus I thought, and thus and thus I did.’ ‘So I acted, and so I failed to act.’” A perfectly clear window into the self! It was not necessary “that the confessor should know that there is a bump of accretiveness”; and if someone was violent, it was not necessary to guess at the dimensions of a bump of “combativeness.” Besides, this writer continued, sins of thought (as opposed to action) were hard to see on the head but easy to probe in pastoral encounters. Beecher thought this solution was simplistic: how would it solve the problems of hypocrisy and dissimulation? But Beecher had to admit that phrenology, too, was imperfect; it was “crude,” he said, and “needed revising.” Little did he know how completely it would be cast away.

CERTAIN BRAIN-SPRIT CORRESPONDENCES

While most American phrenologists compromised with Christianity, there were some who, believing they had solved the riddle of religious experience, felt no need to harmonize new and old. In their self-assured pronouncements and ambitious maps of metaphysical forces, these believers left Christian symbols behind altogether.

It is easy to find the language of complete certainty in handbills, broadsides, and pamphlets produced by itinerants in this period. Popular itinerants like Edward Zeus Franklin Wickes offered this certainty in public lectures.
and in a number of new technologies for measuring the self—including personality charts, tables of mental faculties, and simple theological principles correlating nature, human nature, and divine realities. If Wickes’s printed pronouncements are any indication, he found appreciative audiences by promising complete religious certainty. His promotional materials, and presumably his “entertaining and instructive” lectures, were productions of an inspired and iconoclastic prophet. Everything “in nature is compelled to bear its character at mast-head,” Wickes exclaimed; and new spiritual sciences would help us finally “see secret thoughts and intents of the hearts.”

At first glance, Wickes’s ways of seeing inner thoughts resembled those of other popular phrenologists—charts, busts, and tables. A sample of Wickes’s “Improved Phreno-Chart” is in figure 3. As with other charts, his is organized with the spiritual capacities at the crown of the head and the lower, animal propensities at the base and near the ears. But Wickes’s system is more ambitious than most. His system of correspondences links the human head not just to an inner, spiritual geography but also to the regions of the earth and to Swedenborg’s spiritual essences, love and wisdom. (Wickes’s liberation from Christianity, like that of other freethinkers, was abetted by the ideas of the Swedish seer Emmanuel Swedenborg, who, in a series of angelic revelations, outlined the material-spiritual correspondences that constituted the universe. His system was taken up and modified by many phrenologists, mesmerists, and freethinkers in this period.) Like Swedenborg, Wickes exuded confidence; he found answers to all human problems, personal, business, and marital, in the correspondences between the cosmos and the body.

Wickes’s theological perspective, which he never explicitly stated, is important to ponder. Unlike Hecker and other mediators, Wickes does not use Christian terminology. Essentially a deist, he assumes that nature, not revelation, is the source of religious knowledge: “Nature’s symbolical bible of truth with her life-like pictures is ever open to all; printed by the great Architect of the universe without errors, interpolations or pious frauds.” As a source of truth, nature was an improvement on the ministry and the church; nature was incapable of dissimulation or hypocrisy. With his spiritual guidebooks and pamphlets split about evenly between salvation and healing, Wickes promoted a system in which all mental, spiritual, and physical events were a part of the same creation. Health and salvation were achieved by understanding natural forces and harmonizing one’s own energies with them. “No rational mind can doubt that God controls all things by fixed, unchangeable laws, which are His will and word, instituted by the Creator for the preservation of the beauties and harmonies of nature, by
which the winds blow and the tides of ocean measure.” Wickes, like most radicals, combined phrenological charts with techniques for manipulating immaterial forces, forces that he sometimes gossed as magnetic or electrical. These forces could be redirected and shaped to bring balance to the map of faculties. In this context, self-culture involved an array of techniques for observing, measuring, and redistributing cosmic forces.57

This was precisely the case for Andrew Jackson Davis, whose spiritual peregrinations I already have touched on. Certain that orthodoxy hampered “the spontaneous development of Nature’s own religion,” Davis learned to listen to inner impressions. Among other things, these impressions told him that the “four pillars upon which the theological superstructure is sustained”—“original sin, atonement, faith and regeneration”—were a “mass of disgusting rubbish,” and that “nature, reason and intuition are the only infallible mediums of revelation, the only church, creed and religion natural to the mind of man.” Davis was more combative than most, more willing to trash older theologies, and more willing to engage in invidious comparisons between revelation and nature. When challenged by moderates, Davis assured them that “the best of Harmonial Philosophers are among those who have tried the old system thoroughly.” They had tried it, they had tested “experimental” orthodoxy, but this system had failed them.58 Intolerant of compromise, he criticized his neighbor in Hartford, Horace Bushnell, for his temporizing tome, Nature and the Supernatural.59 Davis would not have been sympathetic to Christian phrenologists either. In any case, the mature Davis, inner voice firmly in command, was overcome with a certainty that impelled him to write things down and tell others about his spiritual discoveries. His resulting formulations made human beings the critical link between all other material and spiritual realities—far from sinful or inhibited, human beings were mediators between heaven and earth. His views on these matters are illustrated in the image adorning the first pages of his Present Age and Inner Life (figure 4), as is his strong conviction, won during the long spiritual struggle with orthodoxy, that inspiration was unmediated—that the unaided self could communicate directly with the spirit world. The self connects the material world with the regions of love and wisdom—again, Swedenborg’s nomenclature—and the concourse of angels. Angels communicate directly with the spiritual mental faculties.

The other aspect of Davis’s image worth noting is the dynamic nature of the forces impinging on the self. This image makes it clear that there is an ongoing commerce between spiritual and mental forces, and that these forces converge on the human body in particular. Combining phrenology,
Figure 4. Andrew Jackson Davis’s map of the spiritual self. From Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Present Age and Inner Life*, 1869.
physiological studies, mesmerism, and other spiritual sciences, Davis, like Wickes and others, extended brain-spirit correspondences outward from the head, mapping mental and spiritual states on the entire body.\(^60\)

Regeneration became a discipline of manipulating these forces and using them to move believers through four different hypnotic (or “mesmeric” or “magnetic”) states. In the first, individuals “lose none of their senses, but are susceptible to all external impressions. They have also the full power of muscular action; and if situated nearly midway between the first and second states, they are inclined to happy feelings.” In stage 2, individuals lose sensation and muscular power but keep their intellectual powers. Stage 3 brings unconsciousness. Finally, in stage 4, the mind is freed “from all inclinations which the body would subject it to, and only sustains a connexion [to the body] by a very minute and rare medium, the same that connects one thought with another.” In this stage, the mind is “capable of receiving impressions of foreign or proximate objects.”\(^61\)

This is the state in which Davis himself received his spiritual impressions. Needless to say, the model of spiritual development Davis recommended here was quite different from older ways of thinking about regeneration.

I have deliberately transgressed boundaries between popular and official, high culture and low, in order to limn out a shared culture of religious psychological experimentation in this period. My argument is that scientific psychologies like phrenology helped liberals put an end to their religious difficulties by opening up new ways of thinking about the self and salvation. Radical liberals and churched liberals both testified to this—that this science and others helped them recover a sense of spiritual vitality. Near the end of his life, Henry Ward Beecher summed up these claims in an article, “Progress of Thought in the Church,” for the *North American Review*. He celebrated the passing of “hideous doctrines” like the doctrine of total depravity in particular. “No ingenuity or eloquence can persuade [believers] that a God, who for ten thousand years has labored to produce an infinite population of damnable souls, can with decency be called our Father. The common sense, the humanity, the moral sense which have grown out of the Gospel are judging theology.” But the heavy lifting had been done by something other than common sense. Part of the transformation, Beecher himself confirmed, was fueled by “recent scientific researches and disclosures respecting the mind of man,” by which Beecher meant not just phrenology—even he knew that that theory was, like depravity, losing its luster—but by all new psychologies “developed
within the scope of our experience and observation,” by which we might better “deduce conceptions of the great mind.” Psychological sciences were becoming the alembic transforming older theological formulas, the methodology that uncovered the original essence of religious truth. The natural world and human nature were revealing new things, tearing down and building up. If properly understood and used, our mental faculties in particular could produce certainty about God and spiritual matters. This is what Beecher meant when he claimed that the moral sense was “judging theology.” Transitions were difficult—“positive faith may stagger while old things are passing away”—but there was a “larger reason, higher morality, deeper spirituality” possible through “this advanced and purified nature of man,” one that might give old truths “clearer and more rational interpretation.”62 This modernist agenda was embraced by liberal laypeople and clergy across the board.

Nevertheless, it is worth reinforcing an obvious point—that not all liberals pursued this course as single-mindedly as Henry Ward Beecher. Putting aside for a moment orthodox complaints and recriminations, which occurred continuously until the 1870s, liberals too had questions about how to handle properly the sharp-edged tools of modern psychology. There is no question that liberals used phrenology to redescribe mysterious inner processes in physiological terms. When they did this, they found themselves able to perceive their experiences more clearly and understand and manage them. They developed techniques for training and manipulating the body and its vital forces and considered these techniques ways of shaping the inner self. This procedure solved their spiritual problems, but it raised other difficulties. Liberals not blinded by enthusiasm for newfound psychological systems of salvation worried about this. Had all spiritual things been reduced to natural forces? Were the movements of spirit merely physical in origin? John Hecker wrestled with this question, hoping to preserve autonomy for spiritual forces by translating standard phrenological terms for mental faculties (inherited from Spurzheim) into more religious ones (e.g., by translating the faculty of “marvellousness” into “spiritual insight” and “veneration” into “Godliness”). Others, like the onetime Methodist minister La Roy Sunderland, were not able to keep the natural and supernatural apart and slid into fully naturalistic accounts of the self.63 Some wondered if the demise of Sunderland and others like him was the natural result of experimenting with such notions.64

Radicals like Davis brought these disagreements into sharp focus. Davis raised one crucial question in particular: Were personal religious
experiences sufficient testimony? Or should they be checked by other sources of religious authority—by the Bible, the ministry, a circle of learned practitioners? When Davis cultivated his faculties in ways that led to sensational visions and revolutionary denunciations of the status quo, many liberals took umbrage. Horace Mann, Henry Ward Beecher, and other open-minded liberals thought Davis a ridiculous imposter. Others called for Davis to submit to a phrenological reading—to see if his putative abilities could be verified by a scientific reading of his cranium. Arguments about experience among phrenologists also incorporated class dimensions, with professional theologians (and psychologists) increasingly ashamed of the intemperate enthusiasms of rationalistic rabble-rousers in their own ranks. Popular lecturers were accused of being merely entertainers. Itinerants like Wickes and delusional radicals like Davis were giving science a bad name. Sophisticated defenders of the new science made more measured claims, admitting that precise correspondences were “hit and miss,” even if the basic procedures were sound. Body and spirit were linked in some way. Besides, though imperfect, phrenology was the only useful system for classifying and understanding mental capacities. For this reason and others, many held on to it as a way to better understand inner dynamics of mind and spirit.

There was one final irony here, though, not noticed by most liberals embracing this new knowledge—namely, that moving the site of experience outside its dark, interior spaces and onto the outer surfaces of the brain did not solve the problem of seeing spiritual things clearly. For the brain and how to understand it was changing too, and even if the truths found by employing some form of phrenology provided spiritual comfort, the sand was shifting. In very short order, phrenological terminology and practices would take their turn at being old, imprecise, and “speculative,” and these formulations, like the ones they displaced, would be casually cast aside. In the 1860s and 1870s, a new physiological psychology emerged, one that provided better ways of understanding the self, its vital forces, and how to develop them. This newer psychology, essentially modern scientific psychology, was, as Lucy Hartley has shown, phrenology’s logical outcome and the source of its dissolution.