

**AN INQUIRY INTO THE
INFLUENCE OF
PHYSICAL CAUSES UPON
THE MORAL FACULTY**

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An Inquiry Into the Influence of Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty by Benjamin Rush

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BENJAMIN RUSH

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INTO THE
INFLUENCE OF PHYSICAL CAUSES
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THE MORAL FACULTY.

Delivered before a meeting of the American Philosophical Society, held at Philadelphia,
on the Twenty-seventh of February, 1786, by

BENJAMIN RUSH, M.D.

1786 - 1879

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INTRODUCTORY NOTICE.

In the numerous discussions which have arisen out of Dr. Gall's discovery of the functions of the brain, many attempts have been made to show that his views were not original. The divisions of that organ into different compartments, and the location in these of different mental faculties, exhibited by various authors, from Aristotle down to John Baptista Porta who published in the seventeenth century, have been confidently referred to, as evidences that Dr. Gall's doctrines are the mere revival of exploded theories. Dr. Gall himself has recorded the opinions and speculations of these authors, and pointed out that while they located the faculties in different parts of the brain from fancy, he did so from observation. But the nearest approach to Dr. Gall's discovery, which has come under my notice, is one that the opponents of Phrenology have not referred to. It is contained in "An Inquiry into the influence of Physical Causes upon the Moral Faculty," delivered by Dr. Benjamin Rush, before a meeting of the American Philosophical Society, held at Philadelphia, on the 27th of February, 1786, published by their request, and dedicated to Dr. Benjamin Franklin. In this Inquiry "coming discoveries" may be said to have cast their shadows before; and Dr. Rush, by observing and faithfully recording the phenomena of nature, has brought to light several important truths which have since been confirmed and elucidated by Phrenology, in a manner that evinces, on his part, extraordinary depth and perspicuity of intellect, combined with the highest moral qualities. The "Moral Faculty," mentioned in his "Inquiry," appears to me to comprehend nearly the three moral sentiments of Benevolence, Veneration, and Conscientiousness, treated of by Phrenologists, each of which is manifested by means of a particular organ, and is influenced by its condition of health or disease; and if the following pages be perused with this explanation in view, the close approximation of Dr. Rush's remarks to the doctrines of Phrenology, will be easily recognised. In many details he differs from, and falls short of the views of Phrenologists, but in the

general conclusion maintained by him, that physical causes influence the moral faculty, the coincidence is complete. I have not been able to find this "Inquiry" printed separately from Dr. Rush's general works; and as it will probably prove interesting to many persons who are not in possession of these volumes, I have been induced to present it in this form to the citizens of the United States. Although all the views contained in it may not have been supported by subsequent investigations, there is so much of sagacity in the author, and of truth in his conclusions, that America may be justly proud of the genius of her son.

GEORGE COMBE,
of Edinburgh.

PHILADELPHIA,
February 15, 1839.

AN INQUIRY, ETC.

GENTLEMEN,

It was for the laudable purpose of exciting a spirit of emulation and inquiry among the members of our body, that the founders of our society instituted an annual oration. The task of preparing, and delivering this exercise, hath devolved, once more, upon me. I have submitted to it, not because I thought myself capable of fulfilling your intentions, but because I wished, by a testimony of my obedience to your requests, to atone for my long absence from the temple of science.

The subject, upon which I am to have the honour of addressing you this evening, is on the influence of physical causes upon the moral faculty.

By the moral faculty I mean a capacity in the human mind of distinguishing and choosing good and evil, or, in other words, virtue and vice. It is a native principle, and though it be capable of improvement by experience and reflection, it is not derived from either of them. St. Paul and Cicero give us the most perfect account of it that is to be found in modern or ancient authors. "For when the Gentiles (says St. Paul,) which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, *these*, having not the law, are a *law* unto themselves; which show the works of the law written in their hearts, their consciences also, bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing, or else excusing, another."^{*}

The words of Cicero are as follow: "Est igitur hæc, iudices, non scripta, sed nata lex, quam non didicimus, accepimus, legimus, verum ex natura ipsæ arripuimus, hausimus, expressimus, ad quam non docti, sed facti, non instituti, sed imbuti sumus."[†] This faculty is often confounded with conscience, which is a distinct and independent capacity of the mind. This is evident from the passage quoted from the writings of St. Paul, in which conscience is said to

^{*} Rom. i. 14, 15.

[†] Oratio pro Milone.

be the witness that accuses or excuses us, of a breach of the law written in our hearts. The moral faculty is what the schoolmen call the "regula regulans;" the conscience is their "regula regulata;" or, to speak in more modern terms, the moral faculty performs the office of a lawgiver, while the business of conscience is to perform the duty of a judge. The moral faculty is to the conscience, what taste is to the judgment, and sensation to perception. It is quick in its operations, and like the sensitive plant, acts without reflection, while conscience follows with deliberate steps, and measures all her actions by the unerring square of right and wrong. The moral faculty exercises itself upon the actions of others. It approves, even in books, of the virtues of a Trajan, and disapproves of the vices of a Marius, while conscience confines its operations only to its own actions. These two capacities of the mind are generally in an exact ratio to each other, but they sometimes exist in different degrees in the same person. Hence we often find conscience in its full vigour, with a diminished tone, or total absence of the moral faculty.

It has long been a question among metaphysicians, whether the conscience be seated in the will or in the understanding. The controversy can only be settled by admitting the will to be the seat of the moral faculty, and the understanding to be the seat of the conscience. The mysterious nature of the union of those two moral principles with the will and understanding is a subject foreign to the business of the present inquiry.

As I consider virtue and vice to consist in *action*, and not in opinion, and as this action has its seat in the *will*, and not in the conscience, I shall confine my inquiries chiefly to the influence of physical causes upon that moral power of the mind, which is connected with volition, although many of these causes act likewise upon the conscience, as I shall show hereafter. The state of the moral faculty is visible in actions, which affect the well-being of society. The state of the conscience is invisible, and therefore removed beyond our investigation.

The moral faculty has received different names from different authors. It is the "moral sense" of Dr. Hutcheson; "the sympathy" of Dr. Adam Smith; the "moral instinct" of Rousseau; and "the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world" of St. John. I have adopted the term of moral faculty from Dr. Beattie, because I conceive it conveys, with the most perspicuity, the idea of a capacity in the mind of choosing good and evil.

Our books of medicine contain many records of the effects of physical causes upon the memory, the imagination, and the judgment. In some instances we behold their operation only on one, in others on two, and in many cases, upon the whole of these faculties. Their derangement has received different names, according to the number or nature of the faculties that are affected. The loss of memory has been called "amnesia;" false judgment upon one subject has been called "melancholia;" false judgment upon all subjects has been called "mania;" and a defect of all the three intellectual faculties that have been mentioned has received the name of "amentia." Persons who labour under the derangement, or want, of these faculties of the mind, are considered, very properly, as subjects of medicine; and there are many cases upon record, that prove that their diseases have yielded to the healing art.

In order to illustrate the effects of physical causes upon the moral faculty, it will be necessary *first* to show their effects upon the memory, the imagination, and the judgment; and at the same time to point out the analogy between their operation upon the intellectual faculties of the mind and the moral faculty.

1. Do we observe a connection between the intellectual faculties and the degrees of consistency and firmness of the brain in infancy and childhood? The same connection has been observed between the strength, as well as the progress, of the moral faculty in children.

2. Do we observe a certain size of the brain, and a peculiar cast of features, such as the prominent eye, and the aquiline nose, to be connected with extraordinary portions of genius? We observe a similar connection between the figure and temperament of the body and certain moral qualities. Hence we often ascribe good temper and benevolence to corpulency, and irascibility to sanguineous habits. Cæsar thought himself safe in the friendship of the "sleek-headed" Anthony and Dolabella, but was afraid to trust to the professions of the slender Cassius.

3. Do we observe certain degrees of the intellectual faculties to be hereditary in certain families? The same observation has been frequently extended to moral qualities. Hence we often find certain virtues and vices as peculiar to families, through all their degrees of consanguinity and duration, as a peculiarity of voice, complexion, or shape.

4. Do we observe instances of a total want of memory, imagination, and judgment, either from an original defect in the stamina of the brain, or from the influence of physical causes? The same

unnatural defect is sometimes observed, and probably from the same causes, of a moral faculty. The celebrated Servin, whose character is drawn by the Duke of Sully, in his Memoirs, appears to be an instance of the total absence of the moral faculty, while the chasm produced by this defect, seems to have been filled up by a more than common extension of every other power of his mind. I beg leave to repeat the history of this prodigy of vice and knowledge. "Let the reader represent to himself a man of a genius so lively, and of an understanding so extensive, as rendered him scarce ignorant of any thing that could be known; of so vast and ready a comprehension, that he immediately made himself master of whatever he attempted; and of so prodigious a memory, that he never forgot what he once learned. He possessed all parts of philosophy, and the mathematics, particularly fortification and drawing. Even in theology he was so well skilled, that he was an excellent preacher, whenever he had a mind to exert that talent, and an able disputant for and against the reformed religion, indifferently. He not only understood Greek, Hebrew, and all the languages which we call learned, but also all the different jargons, or modern dialects. He accented and pronounced them so naturally, and so perfectly imitated the gestures and manners both of the several nations of Europe, and the particular provinces of France, that he might have been taken for a native of all, or any, of these countries: and this quality he applied to counterfeit all sorts of persons, wherein he succeeded wonderfully. He was, moreover, the best comedian, and the greatest droll that perhaps ever appeared. He had a genius for poetry, and had wrote many verses. He played upon almost all instruments, was a perfect master of music, and sang most agreeably and justly. He likewise could say mass, for he was of a disposition to do, as well as to know, all things. His body was perfectly well suited to his mind. He was light, nimble, and dexterous, and fit for all exercises. He could ride well, and in dancing, wrestling, and leaping, he was admired. There are not any recreative games that he did not know, and he was skilled in almost all mechanic arts. But now for the reverse of the medal. Here it appeared, that he was treacherous, cruel, cowardly, deceitful, a liar, a cheat, a drunkard, and a glutton, a sharper in play, immersed in every species of vice, a blasphemer, an atheist. In a word, in him might be found all the vices that are contrary to nature, honour, religion, and society, the truth of which he himself evinced with his latest breath; for he died in the flower of his age, in a common brothel, perfectly cor-