

by Randy Alley

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Dr. Kreider Speaks Out - Part 4: Conclusion

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In all that we have said we do not wish to be understood as denouncing believers in phrenology and mesmerism. Some of the most amiable men we ever knew were their advocates, and honestly believed in all that was represented of them. Nor do we deny that the excitement produced by their presentation to the consideration of men has been wholly unproductive of benefit. We cheerfully admit that phrenological enquiries and disputations have reflected light upon anatomy and physiology by provoking investigation, and so far has hastened discovery and it may be, that even mesmerism with its phosphorescent light has shot a feeble ray into the dark caverns of mental philosophy. But we denounce that prurient curiosity exhibited by too many grave and learned doctors which induces them to descend from the elevated theater occupied by a sound philosophy to mingle with mountebanks and pretenders, thus degrading themselves and bringing reproach upon a noble profession for ages with untiring zeal has trimmed the lamp of science, and gathered and preserved the radiant gems of truth, whose concentrated light benevolence cheerfully directs-upon suffering humanity with a hand ever ready to alleviate the sorrows and cure the "ills which flesh is heir to." 1

From Kreider's papers we can gather that he was interested in a variety of subjects other than medicine. He seemed to be skeptical of the pseudoscience of his day as well as outspoken against malpractice and quackery.

Dr. Kreider's opinions on phrenology and mesmerism were consistent for the period in which he lived. During this time, the line between science and pseudoscience was obscure. Thousands of people, including scientists and physicians, believed that mankind was ready to discover the keys to unlock the secrets of the universe. These people searched for this magical answer and many of them believed that phrenology and mesmerism might provide the answer. However, Kreider knew frauds when he saw them. He gave each pseudoscience the attention it merited. He accurately and logically determined that phrenology and mesmerism were fraudulent pseudosciences.

This merited attention is best demonstrated by Kreider's lack of detail when speaking on mesmerism. These claims were pronounced dead on arrival when Thomas Jefferson circulated the report of the first commission upon mesmerism's introduction in America. No other evidence was needed by the scientific community to prove that animal magnetism was more imagination than fact. No scientific evidence had ever been submitted to prove the worth of mesmerism, therefore there was no evidence to refute. The published opinions of this time acknowledged these facts, and as such, treated mesmerists with scorn and ridicule.

Kreider's views followed this precept. Kreider did not address mesmerism directly. Rather, he ridiculed the experiences of the mesmerists and then stated plainly that the two French commissions reviewed animal magnetism and, upon scientific testing, found it to be totally without merit. This evidence, for Kreider, was proof enough that mesmerism was

fraud. The tales of success spread by the mesmerists were only a fine source of humorous anecdotes, fit only for public spectacle. Kreider applied no more of his time or attention to the issue.

In dealing with phrenology, Kreider had to be more thorough. Phrenology had one major advantage over mesmerism: everyone could see the protuberances measured by the phrenologist. They could also believe that different organs controlled different emotions, just as the eyes controlled sight and the ears controlled hearing. Phrenologists, by providing exercises to the measured individuals, gave themselves an easy out when proven wrong. The patient obviously had not performed the exercises completely as needed. The burden of change was then placed upon the patient instead of the absence of the alleged organs.

Kreider cited the same types of evidence against phrenology as other physicians of his era. Phrenology was more difficult to disprove because the majority of people did not understand anatomy. Outside of the scientific and medical communities few people understood the workings of the human brain. Because of this lack of understanding, Kreider had to be complete in his dissection of the subject. Kreider presented comprehensive medical evidence that the brain is not made up of a series of separate organs, nor does each nonexistent organ control a different function of personality. To support these facts, Kreider cited the top physiologists of the time and detailed the experiments conducted by them. The information refuted evidence that phrenology might be valid method of science.

Kreider's philosophical arguments are a little more difficult to explain. However, they also are supported by the common ideas of his peers. While it was readily admitted that all animals possessed brains, it could not be rationally argued that these brains were all similar. Man and animals did not follow similar patterns. Animals were consistent in their behavior, man was not. Animals were controlled by unseen patterns of natural instinct. Birds knew instinctively when to fly south, when and where to build nests and how and when to mate. Man did not follow these same instincts but controlled himself. Man decided when, where and what to build for himself. Man could determine based upon his own desires where and when to travel. Man could control his being.

Kreider was a product of his times. His thoughts on phrenology and mesmerism were consistent with those of his peers. His arguments were rational and logical in the context of his times. Furthermore, he was unwavering in his belief that frauds and charlatans had no place in science. He demonstrated this belief in both his manuscript on phrenology and mesmerism and in his actions as a member of the Ohio State Medical Society.

Michael Zimmerman Kreider, like many of his peers, was limited by some of his beliefs, his use of religion as fact, and the confines of science during his lifetime. But he was an early skeptic who tried to ground his communications in science.

[Randy Alley recently received his Masters Degree in History; this article is taken from a part of that thesis.]

1Michael Z. Kreider, Kreider Manuscript of Phrenology and Mesmerism, Randall Alley, ed., Folder 28-B, Michael Z. Kreider Papers, Pearson Med., Springfield, IL, pp. 24-25.