

**Private Housekeepers, Public Health-keepers:
The Economy of Health in Catharine Beecher's Domestic Ideology**



Catherine Mas

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Columbia University Department of History

Advisor: Professor Caterina Pizzigoni

Second Reader: Professor Elizabeth Blackmar

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* The cover image is a photograph of Catharine Beecher circa 1870-75. The original is located at the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, Connecticut.

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Introduction

“Many a mother will testify, with shuddering, that the most exquisite sufferings she ever endured, were not those appointed by nature, but those which, for week after week, have worn health and spirits when nourishing her child.”¹ Catharine Beecher wrote these words in 1842, when, from her perspective as an educator and reformer, America was in danger of serious public health decline. As the above quote indicates, Beecher focused on the health of women, who suffered, not as a result of physical causes rooted in sexual characteristics, but rather from improper training for their domestic responsibilities.

Women’s performance of duty had effects that reverberated through the walls of the home and, thereby, determined the condition of a nation built on families. Beecher believed that men and women were equal in capacity, and she advocated a division of labor between the sexes to produce social harmony. In particular, while men’s duties took place in the public and political sphere, women’s duties were essentially domestic and emphasized child-rearing. Women’s lack of political power did not indicate inferiority; rather, it indicated their separate and crucial responsibilities in the social division of labor to maintain the physical, intellectual, and moral well-being of the nation.

Beecher came to believe that the home and the school were the primary locations of public health. This logic placed the physical state of the nation in women’s hands. This essay explores her fixation on health along her ideological trajectory, honing in on the experiences that led her to foreground health in her writings. What does Beecher’s career as a writer and educator tell us about women’s position in American society? Why did Beecher shift her attention from

¹ Catharine Beecher, “Physical Debility of American Women,” *Lady’s Pearl* (August 1842).

education to health, and why did health become such an essential part of public discourse in the early republic?

Throughout her career, Beecher determined to raise women's professions as mothers, teachers, housekeepers, and nurses to the status of men's professions in her understanding of the American social order. She embarked on a campaign to combat women's lack of training and, in turn, contributed to the nation's progress towards the Christian democratic ideal spelled out in her writings. Beecher built this ideal on the basis of nineteenth-century democratization, and it hinged on the concept of America as a nation whose citizens accepted their Christian duty.

Beecher's philosophy merged the pervasive ideological institutions of democracy and Christianity. Her experience led her to believe that as long as Americans inhabited a Christian democracy, men and women with different positions of power could work together on a path towards progress. While democracy meant freedom to choose, Christian behavior required choosing to obey a moral code. This Christian definition of democracy entailed a willing self-sacrifice for the common good to promote a harmonious society. This essay suggests that women participated in this democracy by overseeing the nation's health through their leadership in the home, the school, and the church.

Beecher understood that American life was unpredictable; in fact, she prefaced her 1841 *Treatise on Domestic Economy* with anecdotes of a mother's untimely death, a family's migration West, and economic instability—commonplace situations that called on women to assert their domestic influence on the family and self-sacrifice for the common good. Her *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, a work that represents her life project, was not only a manual on the organization of the human body, the system of the home, and the order of domestic life; Beecher also embedded her ideological agenda within the volume. As the useful information in

Beecher's writing gave rise to its vast popularity, her philosophy may have thus resonated with American Protestant women of her time.

In addition to her personal experience's impact on her ideology and concerns, Beecher registered the shifting values brought on by a market revolution. These capitalist standards emphasized work that was paid, and in turn trivialized women's professions—in particular, unpaid domestic labor and teaching. According to Beecher, the professions of law, divinity, and medicine were reputable, and merchants, mechanics, and manufacturers at least had the opportunity of purchasing respect with their wealth, but “the formation of the minds of children has not been made a profession of securing wealth, influence, or honour, to those who enter it.”² Beecher worried that such a broad undervaluing of teachers led to a cycle of poor education that stemmed from unprepared and undereducated teachers who often taught temporarily until offered better prospects. Beecher also lived in an era of Western expansion, and she felt that wives and mothers, removed from their former support systems, would neglect their domestic duties or never learn how to perform them properly, leading to the decline of women's health and the nation's overall quality of life. To elevate the status of women, Beecher needed to access and inform a society growing both economically and spatially. The ways in which she approached this challenge reveals a trajectory of her ideology—one that responded to both personal experience and to social development. She attempted to revalue the home by making domestic practices an invaluable profession within a common national culture, and thereby assigning national importance to women's domestic duty. I argue that Beecher found in health and hygiene an avenue for women to understand and fulfill their duty, as well as assert their influence in the home. In revaluing the domestic duty of women through volumes of writings,

² Catharine Beecher, *Suggestions respecting improvements in education, presented to the trustees of the Hartford Female Seminary, and published at their request* (Hartford: Packard and Butler, 1829), 4.

she also furthered her own career as she shifted her methodology towards the emerging social sciences.

Historians have taken interest in Beecher's gender ideology because it complicates ideas of female dependency in antebellum America. Her writings and her life example empowered and subordinated women at the same time, but she made sense of this seeming paradox. Her voice contrasted the docile, acquiescent "true women" of the nineteenth century that historian Barbara Welter described in 1966, using women's magazines as evidence.³ Ten years later, Nancy F. Cott challenged the historiography of the "cult of true womanhood," a concept that orchestrated an American movement without the female voice. She argued that women were not passive victims in a changing society; rather, they engaged with and helped create the ideologies and the changes of their society.⁴ Beecher contested the popular culture that advocated natural female inferiority. In her intellectual biography of Beecher, Kathryn K. Sklar argued that the major contribution of Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy* "was to define a new role for women within the household. Of her four major predecessors [Theodore Dwight, Herman Humphrey, William Alcott, Lydia Maria Child], three were men, and all assumed male control of the domestic environment."⁵ During a period of democratic turmoil, Beecher held that the home should be stable, and women's willing subordination to men eliminated antagonism between the sexes and promoted the general good of society. Sklar demonstrates that Beecher believed in the equality of condition and that women chose to adhere to a division of labor that promoted American stability and progress.

³ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, No. 2 (Summer, 1966), 151-174.

⁴ Nancy F. Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood: "woman's sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

⁵ Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 153.

My project brings further understanding to Beecher's gender ideology by examining her ideas about the health aspect of "woman's true profession" and its extension to the nation at large. I argue that Beecher employed anatomy and physiology to serve her domestic philosophy. Physical knowledge helped define women's duty, emphasize their authority in American society, and rationalize the human body as lacking major sexual distinctions.⁶ It was essentially the source of her assertion that women were "the conservators of the domestic state, the nurses of the sick, the guardians and developers of the human body in infancy, and the educators of the human mind."⁷

Although she remained consistent in her ideas on gender and domesticity, the way in which the subject of health figured into her ideology presents an evolution in her career. She did not foreground health in her writings until the publication of the *Treatise* (1841), and her private letters suggest that personal experiences contributed to this shift. Therefore, I analyze Beecher's published work in conjunction with her private writings to reveal the nature of this shift. The Beecher family's correspondences are extensive, and the historiography has made commendable use of Catharine's letters. My approach, however, is to take a fresh look at her letters, reading them through the lens of health. In doing so, I am re-investigating Beecher's early life in order to understand how her personal experience with health influenced her public presence. Popular literature written by Beecher's contemporaries is additional primary evidence that illuminates her thinking on health. Her sense of urgency to spread medical knowledge surfaced at a time when anatomy and physiology began to influence the Christian understanding of the human body.

⁶ See: Michael Sappol, "The Cultural Politics of Anatomy in 19th-Century America: Death, Dissection, and Embodied Social Identity," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1997). I draw from Sappol's interpretive framework to explain Catharine Beecher's medical philosophy and her impact on female self-perception.

⁷ Catharine Beecher, *The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Woman* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and co., 1851), 28.

Chapter One examines Beecher's early life to show how her personal experience with sickness and death made her acutely aware of the physical state of others. Chapter Two follows Beecher into her teaching career—particularly her founding of the Hartford Female Seminary—to understand her health-related experiences as she experimented with educational reform. Chapter Three outlines her experience traveling West and her understanding of the mind-body relationship, which allowed her to integrate a health philosophy into her larger domestic ideology. As she perceived a dangerous decline in American public health, she began to foreground health in her writings. Chapter Four discusses her system of physical education that included a comprehensive mode of behavior. She determined to use anatomy, physiology, and social science to better develop her domestic ideology and reach her lifelong goal to elevate women in society.

I. Early Impacts: Nature, Culture, and the Beginnings of a Domestic Ideology

Catharine Beecher premised her domestic ideology on the natural equality between men and women. The potential towards perfection was inherent in both men and women, which they then cultivated through “proper culture.” Beecher’s childhood relationships—especially those with her parents—shaped her theories on sexual distinctions. She also had developed a unique awareness of physical health while growing up. Death and illness were frequent enough to have a lasting impact in her life. Thus, Beecher’s adolescence sheds light on how health figured into her ideological trajectory.

She came of age under exceptional circumstances because of the cultural prominence her family name had established in the early nineteenth century. Born in 1800, she was the eldest child of eminent Calvinist preacher Lyman Beecher, with whom she was very close. Looking up to her father as an example fostered her childhood aspirations for reform and her strong-minded character. Several events in her adolescence influenced her intellectual development and her career ambitions. Her relationship with her parents, the death of her fiancé, and her resulting subversive attitude towards Calvinist doctrine all shaped her ideology.

Lyman and Roxana Foote Beecher left an impression on Catharine in her early life that manifested prominently in her views of gender. In her 1874 memoirs titled *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions*, Beecher used her parents as examples to show that feminine and masculine characteristics were not fixed. Men and women were equal by nature, but “culture” distinguished male and female characteristics and duties. Culture, in Beecher’s understanding, was the opposite of nature, and it indicated any environmental force that potentially shaped one’s character. Beecher described Lyman, “by natural organization, to have what one usually deemed

the natural traits of a woman, while my mother had some of those which often are claimed to be the distinctive attributes of man.”⁸ Her parents’ true natures diverged from the traditional characteristics associated with the duties they fulfilled. They had to learn their duties through their upbringing and education.

The conclusion she derived from her childhood recollection is as follows:

“I think that my mother’s natural and acquired traits tend to prove that there is in mind no distinction of sex, and that much that passes for natural talent is mainly the result of culture. For my father had the passionate love of children which makes it a pleasure to nurse and tend them, and which is generally deemed a distinctive element of the woman. But my mother, though eminently benevolent, tender, and sympathizing, had very little of it.”⁹

The reversal of traditional gender traits in Beecher’s parents did not disrupt their duties as mother and father; rather, they demonstrated the equality of condition between men and women. The fact that Roxana was less affectionate than Lyman did not make her any less of a mother; in fact, her efficient fulfillment of domestic duties made her a successful mother. Her parents also subverted traditional intellectual characteristics associated with men and women, as she wrote, “my father was imaginative, impulsive, and averse to hard study; while my mother was calm and self-possessed, and solved mathematical problems, not only for practical purposes, but because she enjoyed that kind of mental effort.”¹⁰ Where women were expected to prevail in the emotional realm and men in the logical, the opposite was true for Lyman and Roxana. For example, “in sudden emergencies she [Roxana] had more strength and self-possession than my father.”¹¹ Lyman was more emotionally expressive; Catharine recalled that his “discipline was

⁸ Catharine Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* (New York: J.B. Ford, 1874), 16.

⁹ Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences*, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

sometimes administered with tears.”¹² In contrast, she called the aversion to emotional expression “a Footism,” after her mother Roxana Foote, who exemplified the trait.¹³

The fluidity of masculinity and femininity that Beecher’s parents demonstrated led her to conclude that men and women were equal by nature and then shaped distinctively by culture. This idea influenced Beecher’s ideology greatly. She suggested that, just as the positions of motherhood and fatherhood were not limited by gender, the domestic duty was not a biological mandate for women. As women’s duty was not determined by their reproductive capacity, Beecher encouraged women to become educators to fulfill those female-oriented duties. She believed that democracy socially imposed the separate duties on men and women, in which women willingly sacrificed some independence for the overall benefit of their country.

Beecher’s nature-versus-culture worldview engendered her belief in the perfectibility of the human condition. Culture had the power to shape one’s character and “produce the most perfect of all existences, a superior and well-balanced mind.”¹⁴ Education in early life was so potent because it could correct a student’s natural defects, for “however great may be the difference of capacities in *different individuals*, the faculties of the *same mind*, may by proper culture be all nearly equally developed.”¹⁵ In fact, she used this worldview to understand her own personal nature, specifically her inherent defects which culture corrected. For instance, when Roxana died in 1815, Catharine was fifteen years old, the eldest of eight children, and—against her free-spirited nature—she immediately assumed many of the responsibilities her mother had left behind. Naturally averse to chores and schoolwork, she learned how to sew and complete household tasks given a certain amount of training. She continued to develop

¹² Catharine Beecher, *The Religious Training of Children in the Family, the School, and the Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1864), 18.

¹³ Catharine Beecher to Henry Ward Beecher, February 29, 1860, Yale University Library.

¹⁴ Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences*, 14.

¹⁵ Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education*, 40.

intellectually as an adult. Though she lacked a “natural tendency to metaphysical pursuits,” the success of her 1831 *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy* proved the power of education to correct natural weaknesses.¹⁶

She applied this same concept to the nation at large, writing that America would eventually attain a state of perfection “by a gradual gaining of light upon darkness, intelligence upon ignorance, virtue upon vice, holiness upon sin, till the victory shall be complete.”¹⁷ Using this framework to interpret her surroundings, she believed that people of different physical constitutions (i.e., nature) could perfect their health through the proper behavior and avoidance of environmental abuses to the body (i.e., culture).

When Beecher reached adulthood, she had a brush with marriage. This moment greatly influenced her career path, her religious struggle, and her views on “woman’s profession.” In 1821 she began a courtship with Alexander Fisher, a professor at Yale, and within a year he asked her to marry him. Before she had met him, she had written to her close friend Louisa Wait that she was wary of the thought of marriage. She prioritized her own happiness and pledged to be selective in choosing a husband. She wrote that she “never could give up such a father and such a home and friends as mine” for a husband who did not fulfill her high expectations of marriage.¹⁸ Understanding herself as someone attracted mostly to intellectual traits, she confided to Louisa, “The more I think of it the more I am sure that I ought to guard my heart from the fascination of genius and the flattery of attentions till I am sure that my happiness is not at stake.”¹⁹ Her reservations towards marriage indicate her belief that marriage was not her sole potential, and it was not the only means towards a fulfilled and happy life.

¹⁶ Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences*, 55.

¹⁷ Beecher, *True Remedy*, 233.

¹⁸ Catharine Beecher to Louisa Wait, 1821, Schlesinger Library.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

In January of 1822 she wrote another letter to Louisa describing her feelings towards Fisher after their relationship had developed, stating, “I soon felt no doubt that I had gained the *whole* heart of one whose equal *I* never saw both as it respects intellect and all that is amiable and desirable in private character. I could not ask for more delicacy and tenderness, all that I regret is that we must be so soon and so long separated.” The separation to which Beecher referred was Fisher’s scheduled eight-month trip to Europe in April of that year for academic purposes. On that voyage to England, Fisher died at sea in a shipwreck. The tragic accident defeated Beecher emotionally and destroyed her hopes of marriage. Although she never made marital vows, her unfulfilled engagement would remain with her throughout life as she dreamt of an afterlife with her fiancé. She wrote to Louisa, “what meeting will there be in Heaven if our weary feet should ever reach that blessed shore, where our treasures are so fast accumulating, and what is there worth living for but to secure our title to that eternal weight of glory?”²⁰

Beecher’s conviction that Fisher presided in Heaven conflicted with Calvinist doctrine, for Fisher never had a conversion experience. In fact, it was during her time of mourning that she doubted the tenets of her religion, evidenced by a series of letters between Beecher, her father Lyman, and her brother Edward discussing Catharine’s own refusal to undergo religious conversion. In 1822, Edward expressed his frustration with Catharine in the following letter passage:

You ask, “How can I make myself feel?” I can tell you how you can prevent yourself from ever feeling. *It is by continually yielding as you do now to your aversion to duty.* If you go on thus, sensible of the misery of your state just enough to make you uneasy, that never so as to rouse your *whole soul* to action, you will linger along enjoying neither the pleasures of this world nor the hopes of the world to come, till your day of grace is past.”²¹

²⁰ Catharine Beecher to Louisa Wait, 22 January 1823, Schlesinger Library.

²¹ Edward Beecher to Catharine Beecher, June 21, 1822, Schlesinger Library.

Edward equated Christian duty with the conversion experience itself. Such a condemnation of Catharine's personal failure was enough for her to turn against the Calvinism of her father and brother and to invent her own brand of Christian duty. If she believed in Edward's threat of exclusion from the afterlife, she had to also believe that Fisher's lack of a conversion experience meant he had not been saved. She could not accept the idea that Fisher's premature death excluded him from God's grace. Although she held on to the Protestant concept of duty to fulfill God's will on Earth, she understood that duty in novel ways, particularly as something other than a conversion experience.

She refashioned Christian duty as self-sacrifice for the common good, which in women's case meant properly performing their specific responsibilities pertaining to the family. It also entailed the larger sacrifice of their political potential in exchange for domestic influence. Historian Edmund Morgan described freedom in the early nineteenth century as the "American Paradox" since slavery and the rise of democracy were interdependent and flourished at the same time.²² In a similar sense, democracy and the subordination of women also thrived together, but this did not present a problem so long as women willed their subordination. For Beecher, there was nothing paradoxical about democratic subordination; in fact, it described her understanding of Christian duty and the fundamental division of labor that promoted American progress.

Also, women had the choice to avoid subordination if they desired. She made clear that "no woman is forced to obey any husband but the one she chooses for herself; nor is she obliged to take a husband, if she prefers to remain single."²³ Beecher, who herself never married, was living proof that this democratic air of choice was not an empty promise. Married or not, self-sacrifice was the cornerstone of Beecher's moral philosophy; both the family and democracy

²² Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *The Journal of American History* 59, no. 1 (June, 1972).

²³ Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 1841 ed., 3.

were contingent upon it. She characterized America as a democratic nation of citizens who freely chose to submit to God's will. Although she did not submit to marriage, she found other ways—professions still labeled “woman's duty”—to practice Christian self-sacrifice and contribute to the division of labor towards progress. This was Beecher's understanding of Christian duty, one that contrasted her brother's Calvinist admonitions. Thus, Christianity was the crucial element that made inequality and democracy compatible.

Perhaps her ultimate choice to remain single gave her the freedom from marital submission that then allowed her to take on ambitious projects for reform. Since the profession of marriage and motherhood was no longer an option for her, Beecher would develop women's alternatives to marriage such that they both achieved social esteem and fulfilled Christian duty. Motherhood was a career that demanded a mother's undivided attention. For example, her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe was only able to produce the best-selling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because Catharine gave “a year of her time” to manage Harriet's household while she wrote.²⁴ Both sisters knew that Harriet could not fully devote herself to two professions at once, so Catharine postponed her many projects and took charge of the Stowe household until her sister “[got] Uncle Tom out of the way.”²⁵

The events described above pushed Beecher to re-examine the meaning of happiness and how she would attain it in her adult life. She had previously referred to her potential husband's “little attentions and kindness that in domestic life constitute a great share of a woman's happiness,”²⁶ but after Fisher's death, her lost hope in a Calvinist conversion, and a decade of teaching, she reformulated a means towards happiness. She taught her students that God was “the

²⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe to Lyman Beecher and Henry Ward Beecher, 19 September 1851, in Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Throne Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 344.

²⁵ Catharine Beecher to Mary Beecher Perkins, 27 September 1851, Yale University Library.

²⁶ Catharine Beecher to Louisa Wait, 1821, Schlesinger Library.

Great Happiness Maker,” who intended that humans achieve happiness by following the Christian path. Given the interdependent relationship between morality, intellect, and physical health, all were essential components of happiness that deserved equal attention. But as she attempted to construct a path towards happiness, she discovered more and more its major obstacle: illness.

II. The Hartford Experiment: Teaching Experiences and Documenting Health

By her late twenties, the insight Beecher gained from her experience founding the Hartford Female Seminary, crystallized her view of women's place in American society. In the sexual division of labor, she made women responsible for leading America to a perfected state. The following passage from her 1829 *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education* sums up her understanding of women's duty:

Though she may not teach from the portico, nor thunder from the forum, in her secret retirements she may form and send forth the sages that shall govern and renovate the world. Though she may not gird herself for bloody conflict, nor sound the trumpet of war, she may enwrap herself in the panoply of Heaven, and send the thrill of benevolence through a thousand youthful hearts. Though she may not enter the lists in legal collision, nor sharpen her intellect amid the passions and conflicts of men, she may teach the law of kindness, and hush up the discords and conflicts of life. Though she may not be clothed as the ambassador of Heaven, nor minister at the altar of God; as a secret angel of mercy she may teach its will, and cause to ascend the humble, but most accepted sacrifice.²⁷

These polarities between male and female duties emphasized the self-denial that Beecher required of women for the well-being of their families and the country. The three professional careers of men to which Beecher often referred were law, divinity, and medicine. Just as it was inappropriate for a woman to become a politician or a soldier, Beecher also characterized her duty in contrast to two of those three male professions—ministers and lawyers. However, nowhere in this passionate enunciation of women's unique influence did she mention women's exclusion from the medical practice. While she opposed the idea that women, as equals to men, should be able to join them in their professions, her experiences to date caused her to consider health as a relevant duty for women in the sexual division of labor.

²⁷ Catharine Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education, Presented to the Trustees* (Hartford: Packard & Butler, 1829), 54.

As Beecher established her public presence through her writings, she encountered issues of health within her own family and in her experiences founding and teaching at the Hartford Female Seminary. She left Litchfield, her hometown, in 1819 to go to Boston, where she first started teaching. Four years later, she made plans to establish her own school for girls in Hartford. With the help of her sister Mary, she opened the Hartford Female Seminary in May 1823. The challenges she faced during the following eight years, specifically her struggle to establish regularity in her school, gave her a keen awareness of the problems that plagued the education system. All the while, she registered the health status of those around her.

Perhaps Beecher acquired the habit of diligently documenting health from her father Lyman. Sickness clearly affected Lyman's daily life, for in his letters to Catharine he consistently took note of the physical state of those in his company. In an 1819 letter to Catharine, he wrote, "George has been quite such for three days with an epidemic cold. More sick than I have ever known him. Mother is gaining excepting yesterday she was (I heard it from her own mouth) *tired to death*, though she continues still to breath and move and I hope to show her to you all soon in Boston. Mary eats and sleeps and works and walks out and tends Frederick and laughs and looks sad too sometimes."²⁸ Lyman's descriptions established the pattern of correspondence in the Beecher family, one that kept family members updated on each other's personal health.

Beecher gained some invaluable experience in Boston, both in teaching and in organizing responsibilities. Enthusiastic about starting a new phase of her life, the first disappointment she faced was a cold from severe weather. Her uncle with whom she stayed mandated her to confinement until the weather subsided. She wrote to her peer Louisa, "Since I have been in

²⁸ Lyman Beecher to Catharine Beecher, June 1819, Schlesinger Library.

Boston I have been confined to the house the most of the time by direful *East winds* that bring on their wings ‘fogs, mists and rain’ and seem to pierce my vitals with their breath.”²⁹

Two years later, she stayed with family friends in Boston, and with less enthusiasm, she wrote, “I felt discouraged and everything looked dreary. Mr. Judd was sick, Mrs. Judd’s youngest child was taken very sick, many people had called upon me, but no one could go with me to return their calls.”³⁰ Duty called her to self-sacrifice, which led her to act as a substitute teacher for Mr. Judd and spend much time in solitude. Meanwhile, she learned how to manage her time. Pleased with her new daily routine, she shared it with her sister, writing in a letter, “I have arranged my time as follows—I am to get up every morning precisely at 5 and Mrs. Hunting is to see that I keep this resolution, spend one hour in reading, one for exercise and breakfast, then two in giving music lessons, the remainder of the forenoon in preparing patterns and writing music for my schollars, the afternoons four I devote to the school the other two are my own property.”³¹ The new regularity she established in her life coincided with an exposure to sickness, suggesting that she used principles of regularity as a mechanism to control her physical and mental state.

In her correspondence with Louisa Wait, she often gave details pertaining to health. In one 1822 letter she described her family’s health, writing, “Papa is gradually gaining health and strength and is able to preach half the day on Sunday and to speak in the evening. Charles has got quite well though he suffered most dreadfully for weeks. All Mary’s consumptive symptoms have left her and she now seems to have the same complaint as Papa, and since she had adopted his regimen is getting better slowly.”³²

²⁹ Catharine Beecher to Louisa Wait, 1819.

³⁰ Catharine Beecher to Mary Beecher, 1821, Schlesinger Library.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Catharine Beecher to Louisa Wait, January 1822, Schlesinger Library.

Later that year, when Beecher was teaching in Boston, she described herself as “head nurse” during her obligation to care for Miss Julia Porter who was sick with dysentery. Beecher reported in a letter to her brother that though Porter “soon yielded to medicine, her constitution is so feeble that she has been entirely confined to her room and most of the time to her bed from extreme debility.”³³ Beecher demonstrated her adeptness as a nurse, rooted in her awareness of the body and current medical practices. As a caretaker of the sick, she added it was, “my duty to devote my time to her comfort, for she is lonely and feels forlorn.”³⁴ Her duty, thus, was not only to care for Porter’s physical needs, but also to support her emotionally through her sickness.

Beecher recalled a major personal shift during her years founding the Hartford Female Seminary. Once a healthy, spirited young girl who spent much of her time outdoors, her mental over-exertion and stress from running her school “exhaust[ed] the nervous fountain till its resources could never be renewed.”³⁵ She explained in her memoirs that her health started to become an obstacle around the time she wrote *Suggestions* in 1829. Although, retrospectively, she recalled her health deteriorating during this period, she was largely silent on the subject of her own physical condition in her letters. She did, however, describe several instances in which she encountered sickness that prompted her to fulfill certain duties.

In her closing address at the end of the Seminary’s first academic term, she congratulated her students for their hard work and asked them to join her in feeling gratitude, saying, “Let us also consider with thankfulness our preservation from alarming sickness, while many around us have withered and died, and the continuance of life to those who are most dear to us, while many others have been clothed in garments of woe.” These closing remarks evidence a presence of sickness and death that constantly reminded Beecher of health’s transitory nature and made her

³³ Catharine Beecher to Edward Beecher, October 9, 1822, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Catharine Beecher, *True Remedy*, 79.

conscious of and responsible for the physical condition of others. “The preservation of our faculties of mind, and of the frail casket that contains the treasure,”³⁶ she declared, also deserved constant gratitude. She demonstrated a negative attitude towards the physical body, understanding it as the “the frail casket” that housed the supreme soul.

Although Beecher claimed to have followed the balanced regimen of adequate sleep, exercise, and mode of dress while at the Hartford Female Seminary, she wrote, “for twelve waking hours I was under constant pressure of labor and responsibility.”³⁷ Anxiety had a significant presence in Beecher’s family history, and it clearly had negative health effects. In a letter to her father Lyman about her brother’s nerves regarding his career choice, she wrote, “It will add years to his life to put him in the right place.”³⁸ She implied here that prolonged anxiety was associated with decreased longevity. Overworking and mental suffering were closely tied in Beecher’s personal health. Burdened with responsibility, she wrote in a letter to her brother Edward, “I felt like crying all day after he went away, and I and my little church and school have been laboring all alone this fortnight past.”³⁹

In 1826, she described the psychological state of her colleagues, recounting to her brother Edward, “Eliza and Mary are both very anxious and have been for a long time. Nancy for these last few weeks has felt *differently* ...” In the same letter she enquired about Edward’s health, wanting to know “whether you can keep out of the clutches of that evil demon the Dyspepsia and how you continue to do it.”⁴⁰ These letters in which Beecher commented on the health of her

³⁶ Catharine Beecher, An Address Written for the Young Ladies of Miss Beecher’s School, 18 October 1823, Schlesinger Library.

³⁷ Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences*, 62.

³⁸ Catharine Beecher to Lyman Beecher, 1821, Schlesinger Library.

³⁹ Catharine Beecher to Edward Beecher, June 1, 1826, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

⁴⁰ Catharine Beecher to Edward Beecher, April 25, 1826, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

peers show that, though she had not yet developed a health philosophy, she took interest in health and was keenly aware of the physical and mental state of those around her.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, as a student, revealed the atmosphere of Hartford Female Seminary in a letter she wrote to her uncle. She reported as follows:

To Catharine the school is very pleasant. I should think there might be 30 scholars. I do not study anything but Latin for the present, am almost through the grammar. I study mornings and afternoons and read in the time between five o'clock and dark and *work* in the *evening*, all this I do and no more.⁴¹

Harriet, from the student's perspective, made apparent the rigorous schedule Catharine Beecher enforced at her school. Beecher would later conclude that the heavy workload of the teachers, especially, took a toll on the body.

Beecher first encountered an organized set of exercises and stretches to promote good health during her years at the Hartford Female Seminary. In an attempt to "remedy physical defects" at her school, an English woman visited and demonstrated some exercises, which "then had no name," but what Beecher would develop into her own organized system of "Calisthenics."⁴² Borrowing the term from Greco-Roman fitness practice, Beecher was the first to develop the system of free body exercises in the United States and advocate for its establishment in schools' physical education curriculum. Looking back at her implementation of Calisthenics at Hartford, she recalled her conviction "that far more might be done in this direction than was ever imagined or would be credited without ocular demonstration," which caused her to eventually create and publish her own system to be implemented in schools throughout America.⁴³

⁴¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe to George Foote, no date, Yale University Library.

⁴² Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences*, 42-43.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 43.

As Beecher perceived the need for active control over health at Hartford, she presented a new understanding of women's specific duties in society. She characterized the Hartford Female Seminary not only as an experiment in female liberal arts education, but also as an "experiment of the benefits of the division of labour," and in 1829 she presented her observational findings in *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education*. While discussing what comprised the profession of women, she asked rhetorically, "Is it not to form immortal minds, and to watch, to nurse, and to rear the bodily system, so fearfully and wonderfully made, and upon the order and regulation of which, the health and well-being of the mind so greatly depends?"⁴⁴ At this point, she boiled down the significance of women's duty to the physical health of others, so that the dependent mind could flourish from a healthy body. Furthermore, she began to address the need for women to learn the "structure, the nature, and the laws of the body" to prepare them for their profession.⁴⁵

Creating order was Beecher's first response to controlling the body and subsequently the mind. Beecher's first publication of her ideas on reform was the article "Female Education" that appeared in an 1827 issue of the *American Journal of Education*. Beecher quoted a contemporary educator, "Miss Moore," who said, "She who has the best regulated mind will, all other things being equal, have the best regulated family." Regularity, thus, typified Beecher's perspective on reform, and order was the requisite feature of any kind of success. An ordered mind facilitated the development of all other aspects of life, from intellectual life to family life. "Female Education" also marks the first instance where Beecher preached applying of a division of labor to education. Dividing responsibilities to produce a desired result instilled order into the

⁴⁴ Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education*, 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

educational system, while it also elevated teachers by emphasizing the quality and efficiency of their work.

Irregularity in educational system caused teachers “continual vexation and perplexity.”⁴⁶ In this first essay, she demanded public attention to teachers, who suffered from a lack of resources and, specifically, “from a want of suitable *apparatus* and *facilities* for instructing.” The necessary outcome of such neglect was inefficiency, for “a far greater amount of knowledge might be communicated in the same time, were proper facilities afforded.”⁴⁷ Beecher could not battle these institutional problems on her own when the problem was cultural. She realized that she needed to make a case for teachers that would win them public support and respect.

According to Beecher’s perspective on reform, education would vastly improve if society held teachers to a higher professional esteem. Instead, people commonly viewed teaching “as a drudgery suited only to inferior minds and far beneath the aims of the intellectual aspirant for fame and influence, or of the active competitor for wealth and distinction.”⁴⁸ Beecher assigned value to the profession by pointing to teachers’ influence in shaping the morality and habits of the youngest generation of Americans. If teachers were ill-equipped for their profession, the educational failures would resurface in the coming generation as national decline.

Her struggles with the Hartford Female Seminary’s board of trustees to adequately equip her school illustrate her call for systematic change. She recounted in a letter, “Why I wanted *six recitation rooms*, when I had conducted a school of 100 without one, they could not see.” She persevered with her demands, and eventually the trustees not only supplied her with the six she

⁴⁶ Catharine Beecher, “Female Education,” *American Journal of Education (1826-1830)* 2 no. 5, Boston, May 1827.

⁴⁷ Beecher, “Female Education.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

initially asked for, but they “found need for *ten* recitation rooms, and put on four more.”⁴⁹ Even though the trustees had initially deemed her impractical and visionary for her demands, she knew that the success of her school fundamentally depended on the quality of the school’s physical structure and supplies.

A theme had begun to develop at this stage of Beecher’s career about the physical structure’s influence on the interior’s behavior or activity. As indicated above, she discovered how important proper facilities were for teaching, and she learned how to make demands for a well-equipped building. She would apply the same thinking to the house in regards to successful family life, and then to the individual body in regards to physical and mental health. She would create blueprints for homes in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* that would foster the good health and social behavior of the family, as well as blueprints for the body, explaining the structural organization so that informed behavior could promote the balance that led to spiritual happiness.

This early period of Beecher’s life gave her ample material to support the new direction in which she believed women’s professions were headed. Her relationships with relatives and friends required constant updates on health status, and her own experience nursing and guarding the health of others amplified her awareness of health. As the head of a female seminary who tested the efficacy of a division of labor applied to education, her results gave her new research directions. She would ask questions about habits of order and healthy behavior as a result of the challenges of irregularity and sickness she encountered during her early teaching years.

In her 1829 *Suggestions*, she publicly expanded women’s duty within the social division of labor with her statement that, while the physician’s job was to restore health, “the preservation

⁴⁹ Catharine Beecher to Increase Lapham, 1861, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives Department.

of it falls to other hands.”⁵⁰ In the process of rearing the next generation, the future perfection of the nation called on women to guard the health of the young. Beecher never imagined women becoming physicians alongside men; rather, they would form the physical habits of children in a way that would make the physician’s job unnecessary. “The time will come,” Beecher confidently anticipated, “when woman will be taught to understand something respecting the construction of the human frame; the philosophical results which will naturally follow from restricted exercise, unhealthy modes of dress, improper diet, and many other causes, which are continually operating to destroy the health and life of the young.”⁵¹ Her refashioning of the sexual division of labor demonstrates her ambitions for reform that grew out of the time she spent at Hartford, and she would dedicate her career to realizing her hopes for women’s professions.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁵¹ Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education*, 8.

III. Touring the West and Developing the Mind-Body Relationship

Why did Beecher begin to address national health decline? She devoted her early years to her Hartford Female Seminary, during which she wrote educational texts and commentaries and established her moral and religious belief system. Having recently published *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy* in 1831, she set out to the West with her own notions of the laws of mind and body. She visited numerous Western towns and applied the same experimental approach she used at Hartford. She recorded her observations and compiled data, keeping in mind her concerns about the preparation of women for their duties and the flaws in the education system. It was not until she toured the West that she obtained a general picture of the American population—an experience she believed gave her the authority to alert the public about the condition of national health. Up until the publication of her *Treatise* in 1841, she engaged with cultural developments such as the rise of popular medical literature and Alexis de Tocqueville's published account of American society. As she continued to develop her domestic ideology in regard to female education, health emerged as a key issue.

Beecher first traveled to Cincinnati in the spring of 1832 with her father, Lyman, with the intention of founding another school there: the Western Female Institute. The trip exposed her not only to the lack of education and institutions in the West, but also to the widespread health problems families faced. She may have perceived during her travels that, in migrating West to establish new farms and cities, Americans removed themselves from support systems and the easy access to tools that sustained their family's health and their household's function. Although mortality rates and disease were higher in Eastern cities, concern for family health grew out of

the increasingly negative image that both Americans and foreigners developed of frontier life. Beecher reinforced this image with alarm in much of her published work.

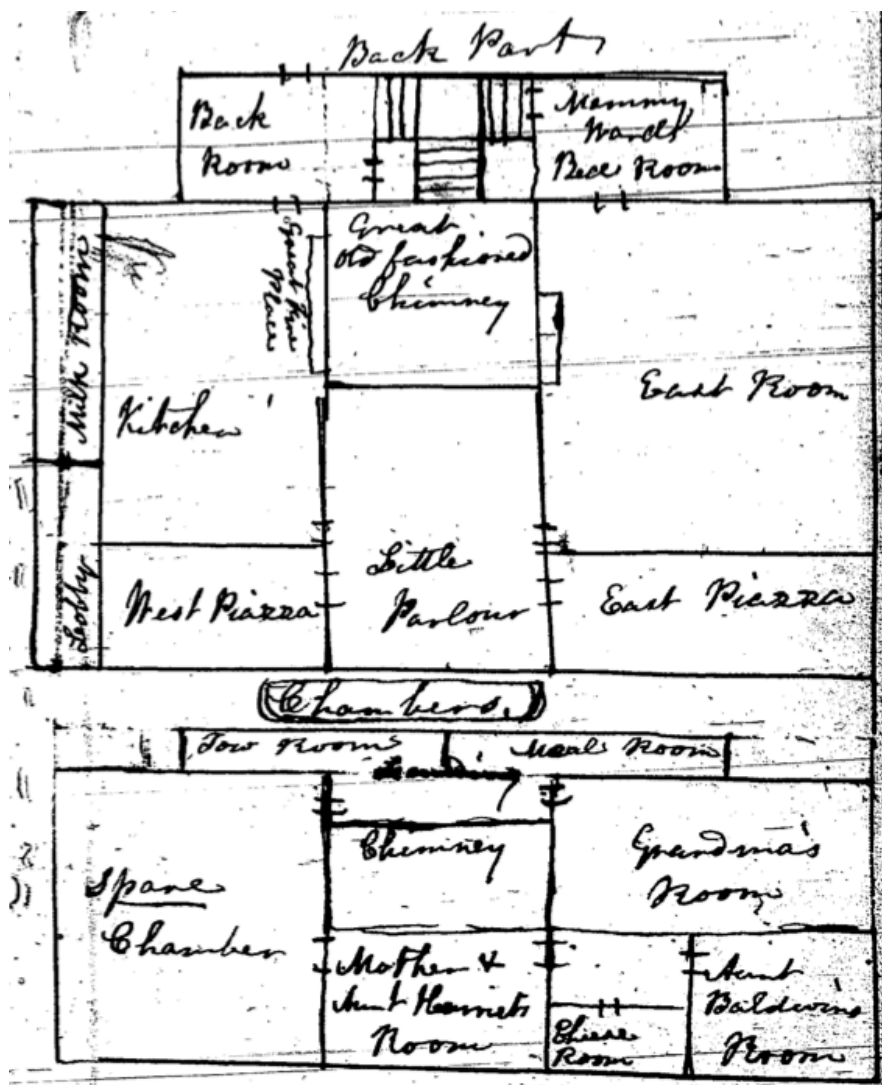
The journal she kept during this time evidences her extensive travels. She wrote down her location almost every day of the month, sometimes adding details she found interesting or worth noting. She recorded and ordered experiences that would contribute to her wisdom as a writer. For instance, it is clear she studied the organization of the home from her sketch of the ground plan and elevation of a relative's house, most likely to serve as material for her later *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, which included her ground plans for ideal structures (Figure 1). She also referred to health in many entries. One Wednesday evening in November 1833, she attended "Dr. Caldwell's lecture on Phys. Ed." Sometimes she recorded personal incidents, such as on 10 July, 1835, when she jotted down, "cut my foot." She also wrote down recipes in her journal that she likely picked up from other women she visited.⁵² Beecher's journal shows that she documented her travels in a systematic way so that she could use her experience as material for her later publications.

According to Sklar's biography, on one of her visits, Beecher offended Edward King, a wealthy man whose home in Chillicothe, Ohio she visited, with her many questions. She asked about the construction of the house, "whether mother managed her farm, whether she gave orders to men," the difficulty of the labor, domestic servants, and [his daughter] Lizzy's riding dress.⁵³ King was insulted by her impolite questioning, but the questions she asked show how she behaved during her travels and how she collected data. Dress and household labor, for example, were factors to which she attributed bad health. Her travels to households across the country

⁵² Catharine Beecher, Journal, Schlesinger Library.

⁵³ Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 119.

Figure 1. Catharine Beecher, Journal, 21 January 1833, Schlesinger Library.



gave her the perception of health decline that originated in the home and called for bringing the home to the forefront of the nation's well-being.

Beecher's letters concerning her Western projects continue to illustrate her experience nursing the sick, but there is a subtle shift in tone from her earlier correspondences. In an 1837 letter to Mrs. Tappan, she wrote, "My children were in good health." Here, she commenced her letter with an update on the health status of her students, suggesting it was a primary concern of the receiver of the letter, whereas in her earlier correspondences, health updates were documentary in tone and often given at the end of the letter. She then wrote, "Mrs. Br's health, I think, has undergone no material change. She has gained no flesh, and her cough is still very troublesome. Besides, she is, I believe, in a state of pregnancy, which will make her care still more dangerous and critical."⁵⁴ Beecher suggested a "removal to New York," perhaps to enter one of the famed water cure establishments, but the patient wanted to stay with her family in Cincinnati. Beecher asserted more authority on the subject of health, suggesting a step forward in the trajectory of her health ideology.

During this period, Beecher became increasingly conscious of the mind-body relationship. She departed for the West having recently published her *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy* in the fall of 1831, where she expounded her concept of the body. This philosophical text did not foreground issues of health; it instead maintained a theological purpose. Having personally rejected the necessity of conversion in Calvinist theology, she attempted to discover a path to salvation through the laws of the mind. She employed a moral methodology for reform, making evangelical perfectionism a prominent feature of her work. The mind was the center of being, according to her mental and moral philosophy, and social conduct was the method of enacting one's duties. Beecher defined habit as "a tendency of the mind to

⁵⁴ Catharine Beecher to Mrs. Tappan, July 29, 1837, Yale University Library.

perform certain acts.”⁵⁵ Often formed in early life through repetition, habits had profound effects on one’s character and health. For this reason, Beecher emphasized the order and structure of everyday behavior in later instructive works like her *Treatise*. She had a mechanical understanding of happiness; one achieved it by “acting *right*,” and what was right was determined by what promoted the “object of design.”⁵⁶ Her ethical philosophy, which she kept throughout her career, assigned happiness to the fulfillment of duty, and health enabled its performance.

Fulfilling duty centered on the activities of the mind, but the mind could not transcend the physical boundaries of the body. According to Beecher, “the mind of man is confined by a material system, with which it is so intimately connected, that many of its operations, and much of happiness, or of suffering, are to be traced directly to this connection.”⁵⁷ The relationship was interdependent—just as mental activity affected the body, disease or fatigue affected the mind. She held that intellectual and emotional exercise wore down the physical body, which is why humans required the phenomenon of sleep, “an entire suspension of all mental efforts.”⁵⁸ In fact, she believed that dreams indicated imperfect health status since they interfered with the mind’s needed rest from a day of intellectual and emotional exertion.

Emotions strained the body, producing “a quicker circulation of blood, in the case of joy, fear, and curiosity; while anxiety, grief, and care, operate to retard circulation.”⁵⁹ Though healthful in moderation, emotions might “produce permanent disease” if they went beyond the

⁵⁵ Catharine Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy, Founded upon Experience, Reason, and the Bible* (Hartford: 1831), 15.

⁵⁶ Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 388.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 416.

limit or if sustained for a long period of time.⁶⁰ Similarly, intellectual exertion was beneficial to health, but might become damaging if too intense or prolonged. Beecher believed a person's physical constitution, formed by habits, determined the limits of his or her intellectual exertion. Her general rule was that "intellectual efforts should be proportioned to the habits of the mind, and to the constitution and health of the body," linking good habits and proper social conduct to mental and physical health.⁶¹

The indications that the mind had injured the body, or that emotional indulgences had reached damaging heights, were self-evident—physical discomfort, difficulty concentrating, and fatigue. Once a person felt these symptoms, he or she required a rest from mental strain until physically restored. Beecher suggested avoiding monotony, turning to amusements, or exercising to restore the body to health. She warned against amusements for mere gratification; they should only be sought as the "means of recruiting body and mind, for the regular and proper discharge of the duties of life."⁶² Her concern about the potential physical effects of the mind always related to their possible interference with fulfilling duty. At this point in her career, she referred to the body as the "animal frame," thus distinguishing the body from the superior soul, which centered on the mind.

The practical applications of understanding the mind-body relationship appeared as she continued to write about the status of women and their domestic duties. She maintained that the problems of female education stemmed from the lack of female teachers. Most of her publications during this period did not center on women's duty to secure health, rather they argued for the expansion of female education. She proposed that Americans establish the stability of the institution of female education, emulating male colleges and professional

⁶⁰ Ibid., 416.

⁶¹ Ibid., 416.

⁶² Ibid., 420.

institutions. Women had peculiar duties that required thorough training, and they would apply their education to “the care of the health, and the formation of the character, of the future citizen to this great nation.”⁶³ Here it becomes clear that she had a national agenda and called for the collective responsibility of all citizens to revalue women’s contribution to American democracy.

Her early focus on female education to elevate the status of teachers and housewives correlates with her lifelong effort to revalue women in society through their invaluable domestic duties. Her health philosophy relied on the authority of women in the home to shape the characters of children and encourage proper behavior of all family members. Since schools were an extension of the domestic realm, the teaching profession had similar responsibilities. As Beecher made the case for the value of women’s professions, she began to bring health to the forefront of discussion.

In an essay Beecher co-authored with T. B. Mason about vocal music as a subject taught in elementary school, she showed interest in its positive health effects on students. Lyman Beecher had called on T.B. Mason to supply the need of sacred music in the West.⁶⁴ Mason moved from Boston to Cincinnati in the early 1830s and became a professor at the Eclectic Academy, a musical association recently founded there.⁶⁵ Mason and Beecher wrote “Report on Vocal Music” for a Western audience, and they turned to their own experience with eastern educational models. Using a methodology similar to that in *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, Beecher and Mason expounded on the mind’s capacity for musical learning. Emotion, attention to time, force, and pitch were aspects in listening and singing that students

⁶³ Catharine Beecher, “Essay on the Education of Female Teachers, for the United States,” *The Family Magazine; or, Monthly Abstract of General Knowledge* 3 (1836).

⁶⁴ Nathaniel Duren Gould, *Church Music in America, Comprising its History and its Peculiarities at Different Periods, with Cursory Remarks on its Legitimate Use and Its Abuse; with Notices of the Schools, Composers, Teachers, and Societies* (Boston: A. N. Johnson, 1853), 139.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

had to learn to discriminate. Since music aroused mental activity and required special training, Beecher and Mason urged educators to accept music as an intellectual field of study that was not physically taxing. The mental health of students was at risk when schools confined them for hours in the classroom, but when a teacher initiated a song, “the physical system is awake; casts off its drowsiness; the mental powers, before over-taxed, rest, and give place to the musical faculties” and children are reinvigorated so that they can return to study.⁶⁶

The authors understood that unrelieved mental labor led to adverse physical effects. Beecher had earlier referred to playing on a musical instrument as an amusement that relieved the mind after periods of intellectual or emotional stress,⁶⁷ and in the context of educational reform in the West, she wrote, “Its physical influence upon the health as a relaxation from other studies, especially of the young, is highly important.”⁶⁸ Beecher’s position on the inclusion of vocal music in elementary education demonstrates her increasing concern about environmental factors that negatively influenced children’s health. Whereas earlier she had considered music as merely an amusement to which people may turn when they experienced mental over-working, here she urged music’s physical relief to be incorporated within the daily routine of elementary schools. She insisted on the need for educational reform when she declared, “the *proper* education of man will be the highest promoter of health.”⁶⁹ Her early focus on an educational reform to promote good health contrasts her later focus on health reform as a means to proper education and future happiness.

Vernacular medical literature, especially works on anatomy and physiology, had emerged in the 1820s and 1830s, and Beecher had picked up on the growing and scientifically reliable

⁶⁶ T. B. Mason and C. Beecher, “Report on Vocal Music, as a Branch of Common School Education,” *The Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science* 1, 9 (1838).

⁶⁷ Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 419.

⁶⁸ Mason and Beecher, “Report on Vocal Music.”

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

field of medical knowledge. Popular medical works had often warned against the dangers of medicine and favored a natural treatment of disease. Most Americans associated medicine with unpleasant, often painful treatments that did not guarantee a cure, and the medical profession was not universally trusted.⁷⁰ Popular medical works focused on the prevention of disease rather than the cure, a message Beecher reinforced in her own work.⁷¹ The essential requirement for preventive medicine was widespread knowledge of anatomy, so several medical experts published anatomical and physiological principles for the popular audience. Moreover, they focused on nature as both the best cure of disease and the best method of prevention. The water cure, an alternative system of medicine also known as hydropathy, relied on nature's restorative power. The practice became popular in the mid-nineteenth century, and Beecher herself attended several hydropathic establishments.⁷² Similarly, health reformers such as Sylvester Graham and William Alcott promoted vegetarianism and complete abstinence from alcohol, tea, coffee, tobacco, and opium for optimal health, for they believed nature had not intended humans to consume animal products or stimulants. Beecher agreed with their approach; although she was not as fervent about radical lifestyle changes as Graham and Alcott were, she advocated

⁷⁰ James C. Whorton, *Nature Cures: The History of Alternative Medicine in America* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷¹ See: William A. Alcott, *The House I Live In, or the Human Body, for the Use of Families and Schools* (Boston: Light & Stearns, 1837). James Ewell, *The Medical Companion, or Family Physician* (Washington: printed for the proprietors, 1827). William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine: or, a Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases* (Exeter: J. & B. Williams, 1839). Reynell Coates, *Syllabus of a Course of Popular Lectures on Physiology, with an Outline of the Principles on Which Depend the Improvement of the Faculties of Mind and Body* (1840). Thomas Beddoes, *Hygëia: or Essays Moral and Medical, on the Causes Affecting the Personal State of Our Middling and Affluent Classes*, 3 vols (Bristol: J. Mills, 1802-3), is a British popular medical work that circulated among the elite classes of England.

⁷² For scholarship on the nineteenth-century water cure movement, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, "All Hail to Pure Cold Water!" in *Women and Health in America*, ed. Judith Walzer Leavitt (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Susan E. Cayleff, *Wash and Be Healed: The Water-Cure Movement and Women's Health* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

following natural laws and minimizing consumption of unnatural products for a balanced lifestyle.

Beecher took many of the diagrams that illustrate the *Treatise* directly from Jerome Van Crowninshield Smith's 1830 *Class-Book of Anatomy* and Henry Hall Sherwood's 1837 *Electro-Galvanic Symptoms and Electro-magnetic Remedies*—books that were not popular but rather directed towards medical professionals. Beecher's method was to use medical sources and translate them into the language of her ideology. Knowledge of anatomy and physiology would be a central means to the health of the family. Moreover, such knowledge assigned women with leadership in carrying out preventive health measures.

The democratization of anatomical knowledge sparked a reformulation of the mind-body relationship. Previously, Americans under the intellectual influence of Christian theology viewed the mind and body as separate entities, the mind being superior and connected to the eternal spirit that would see the afterlife.⁷³ As described above, Beecher had already begun to move away from this perspective, as she demonstrated an interdependent mind-body relationship in *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*. As the field of anatomy advanced in the nineteenth century, many Christians absorbed the new understanding of the body into their worldview. Poor health became increasingly associated with bad behavior and ignorance; in fact, it indicated a violation of natural laws imposed by God. Beecher's personal religious conviction—that conduct and virtue brought salvation—explains her attraction to this anatomical awareness.

Physician and health reformer William Alcott—whose lectures Beecher attended⁷⁴—advanced a Christian physiology beginning in the 1830s. He successfully tied anatomical

⁷³ Michael Sappol, "The Cultural Politics of Anatomy in 19th-Century America: Death, Dissection, and Embodied Social Identity," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1997).

⁷⁴ Catharine Beecher, Memorandum, Schlesinger Library.

knowledge to preventive medicine, and he equated good health to good moral behavior.⁷⁵ The lack of separation between moral conduct and health is also evident in Beecher's work; habit and order in a Christian moral context equated with a healthy lifestyle. Alcott used the language of the wooden-frame house to explain human anatomy in his 1837 *The House I Live in*, developing an extended metaphor that equated the physical body to the site of domesticity. Alcott introduced a new understanding of the spirit-body relationship, as he told his readers, "You will see that the house I live in is my body—the present residence of my immortal spirit."⁷⁶ By linking the physical body with personal identity, Alcott understood it as a means to moral development, and he thus elevated its importance in Christian fulfillment. Beecher, too, developed an understanding of the mind and body as interdependent, and began to emphasize the previously neglected body in the dutiful Christian path.

Lydia Maria Child, a successful writer of household manuals prior to Beecher's *Treatise*, had touched upon health in her works. Her 1829 *American Frugal Housewife*, one of the first and most popular household manuals of the nineteenth century, included a chapter on general health maxims that offered practical advice more so than a health philosophy.⁷⁷ *The Mother's Book*, though lacking in original material, identified mothers as their children's primary educators and health protectors. Such a guide would be useful, Child claimed, since infancy was the most crucial period for mothers in exercising their domestic influence.⁷⁸ Beecher outdid Child by expanding the household manual into a full-fledged treatise. Beecher was the first to systematically define and explain domestic economy. Also, Child directed her manual to middle and upper class women, while Beecher used her understanding of the American social

⁷⁵ James C. Whorton, "'Christian Physiology': William Alcott's Prescription for the Millennium," *Bulletin on the History of Medicine*, 49, 4 (1975): 466-81.

⁷⁶ William Alcott, *The House I Live in; or, The Human Body*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Light & Stearns, 1837), 32.

⁷⁷ Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife* (Boston: Charter, Hendee & Co., 1832), 87-8.

⁷⁸ Lydia Maria Child, *The Mother's Book* (Boston: Carter, Hendee and Babcock, 1831).

structure—one that was fluctuating and volatile—to address the *Treatise* to all classes of women. Beecher’s health education was to be understood through a domestic philosophy that made women and men equal in every capacity, and domestic responsibilities a chosen self-sacrifice rather than a mandate.

She declared her novel approach in the preface to the 1843 edition to the *Treatise* where she wrote, “For more than ten years, I have vainly striven to induce various medical gentlemen, among my personal friends, to prepare a short and popular work on Physiology and Hygiene, for the use of female schools,” but nobody satisfied her requests.⁷⁹ In expressing her dissatisfaction with popular medical literature, she implied that her own *Treatise* offered important medical knowledge that other works failed to relay. Further, she made Physiology and Hygiene part of the necessary curriculum for women who would become mothers and teachers. Such an ideologically laden and female-directed manual on the human body was unprecedented. She had actively worked to realize the goals she announced in her 1829 *Suggestions*, where she hoped women would one day attain a comprehensive knowledge of the human body.

Finally, Beecher linked her health message to American nationalism. Mental over-exertion in America was a problem disguised by the benefits of moral superiority. Beecher believed that Americans were “under the influence of high commercial, political, and religious stimulus, altogether greater than was ever known by any other nation,”⁸⁰ but it took a physical toll on citizens. American women were placed under particular pressure, for “no women on earth have a higher sense of their moral and religious responsibilities, or better understand, not only what is demanded of them, as housekeepers, but all the claims that rest upon them as wives,

⁷⁹ Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the use of young ladies at home, and at school* (Boston: Thomas H. Webb & Co., 1843), 8.

⁸⁰ Beecher, *Treatise*, 1841 ed., 20.

mothers, and members of a social community.”⁸¹ Although such qualities made American women the utmost examples of virtue on earth, neglecting physical health was their pitfall.

Europeans’ perception of Americans’ health led Beecher to emphasize the decline relative to foreign countries. In *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, she quoted Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1835 *Democracy in America* at length. His comparison of American women to European women was the starting point of her *Treatise*, where she clearly presented a national imperative to reform the conditions within the home. By making the home the vehicle for national vigor, Beecher attempted to heighten the public’s value of domesticity. Drawing on Tocqueville’s outsider’s perspective, Beecher confidently claimed that America was unique in that “women are raised to an equality with the other sex; and that, both in theory and practice, their interests are regarded as of equal value.”⁸² Tocqueville showed America’s moral superiority, but Beecher emphasized the obstacles that stood in America’s path to perfection.

After celebrating the United States’ equality of condition, she turned to the dangers she perceived concerning women’s health status in such a democracy. Beecher cited Tocqueville’s perception of American women; “their features were impaired and faded” after they had passed so quickly from the comforts of New England towns to the wilderness of the frontier.⁸³ His testimony supported Beecher’s argument for national attention to revaluing domestic duty. Having traveled to the West as somewhat of an outsider from “civilized” New England, she had also witnessed the pitfall of the West’s vast opportunities. She claimed to have met the female pioneers Tocqueville described, and invoked him again to show that a woman’s noble sacrifice

⁸¹ Ibid., 21.

⁸² Beecher, *Treatise*, 1843 ed., 33.

⁸³ Ibid., 46.

to her family caused her poor health: “Her delicate limbs appear shrunken; her features are drawn in; her eye is mild and melancholy.”⁸⁴

Besides citing Tocqueville’s account, Beecher often compared the British woman to the American woman. She wrote that young American girls “in the wealthier classes are sent to school from early childhood, and neither parents nor teachers make it a definite object to secure a proper amount of fresh air and exercise, to counterbalance their intellectual taxation.”⁸⁵ English women, on the other hand, walked miles without tiring, and visitors had noted their surprise at American women’s relative inactivity.⁸⁶ In this comparison Beecher underscored patterns of exercise behavior, directly linking activity levels and exposure to fresh air to health status.

She also made such comparisons to bolster her petitions for monetary resources. She wrote a letter to retired politician Rufus Choate requesting support for her project to systematize female education. She verified the urgency of her project by citing the German perspective on American women. She wrote, “a German tourist mentions that in various European institutions theoretical and practical lectures on Domestic Economy are delivered; and why should not be instituted in our own land, where they are so much more needed? The sufferings now endured by American women from the want of a proper estimate of the science and practice of Domestic Economy” would cease if Americans implemented Beecher’s system.⁸⁷

Beecher’s engagement with social and political development also shaped her perception of public health and fueled her language of alarm concerning a national problem. She assigned the cause of this decline to America’s moral and intellectual excellence compared to other countries. An excess of “intellectual taxation,” a concept she described in her early work, had

⁸⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁵ Miss Beecher, “Physical Debility of American Women,” *Lady’s Pearl* (August 1842).

⁸⁶ Beecher, *Treatise*, 1841 ed., 22.

⁸⁷ Catharine Beecher to Rufus Choate, 29 August, 1846, The University of Virginia Archives.

spread to a larger extent as a result of democratization, and the ensuing danger called for national attention. She based her philosophy on the overarching assumption that the human condition could be perfected. Thus, she advocated for a common behavior that prevented disease, promoted perfect health, and enabled true happiness. In her worldview, adhering to duty was crucial to happiness, and when bad health limited a woman's ability to fulfill her democratic and Christian duty, her happiness was also at stake, for "no person can enjoy existence when disease throws a dark cloud over the mind and incapacitates her for the proper discharge of her duty."⁸⁸ Mothers were so discouraged by their own health, according to Beecher, that they would advise their daughters against choosing the career of marriage and motherhood. Such hyperbole exemplifies Beecher's new approach to revaluing women's duties—one that sought national attention to the importance of women's professions.

Beecher's experiences in the 1820s and 1830s shaped her domestic ideology and led to a shift in her methods for reform. In her preface to the 1843 edition of the *Treatise* she wrote, "The care of a female seminary, for some twelve years, and subsequent extensive travels, have given such a view of female health, in this Nation, and of the causes which tend to weaken and destroy the constitution of young women," that Beecher felt obligated to contribute to health reform.⁸⁹ Her moral educational background set the basis of her understanding of the physical body and its significance at both the family level and the national level, but her experiences led her to change her method of reform from an evangelical focus to a public health focus. By the 1840s, the mental taxation had become so overwhelming in Beecher's view so as to make its physical effects a predominant issue.

⁸⁸ Beecher, "Physical Debility of American Women."

⁸⁹ Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 7.

IV. Health at the Forefront: Physical Education as the Method of Reform

In 1841, Beecher launched her campaign for healthy and health-educated women with her *Treatise on Domestic Economy*. “The anxieties, vexations, perplexities, and even hard labor, that come upon American women, from this state of domestic service, are endless,” Beecher wrote, referencing the improper education of women, and “many a woman has, in consequence, been disheartened, discouraged, and ruined in health.”⁹⁰ Not only did American women lack an effective domestic system of labor, but they also seemed to be unusually subject to disease, for reasons not clearly known at the time. But Beecher hypothesized their depleted state was the result of ignorance. Starting with the publication of her *Treatise*, Beecher’s agenda focused on the spread of what she called physical education, or instruction on the laws of health and the proper behavior derived from an understanding of those laws.

The nature-versus-culture worldview acquired a new meaning as Beecher fixated on the laws of health. Anatomy and physiology were the blank slates of human nature upon which culture could improve or inflict harm. Similar to the way Beecher perceived her parents as equal in nature, regardless of sex, her anatomical descriptions largely omitted sexual discrepancies. Other popular medical guides of her time focused on childbirth when approaching the subject of women’s health, but Beecher did not consider this information relevant to woman’s performance of her domestic and social duty. Motherhood was a trained profession, not an inherent quality. In fact, she quoted popular medical writer Andrew Combe who affirmed her notion that “all women are not destined, in the course of Nature, to become mothers.”⁹¹ The order she imposed on the body stemmed from a naturally perfect design, which culture—that is, environmental

⁹⁰ Beecher, *Treatise*, 1841 ed., 18.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

influences—had damaged to a significant degree, causing the national health decline about which Beecher alarmed her readers. This chapter discusses the progression of Beecher’s physical education project. Whereas her *Treatise* approached health as one dimension of the domestic order, her 1855 *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* and her 1856 *Physiology and Calisthenics* focused solely on health, showing an increase in her health focus as she advanced in her career. Her personal correspondences additionally evidence her increasing interest in health.

Beecher developed her *Treatise* around the themes of order and regularity. Her previous experiences in education familiarized her with the systematizing approach to reform, so she applied a similar structure to the home—the design of the house, domestic activities, and even the body. She appointed the mother as the organizational leader, for it was her responsibility to “systematize and oversee the work of her family.”⁹² Given Beecher’s attraction to the division of labor as it functioned in various domains, understanding the body as a structure comprised of systems with different but essential responsibilities was not far-fetched.

The *Treatise* also emphasized the orderly behavior needed to carry out one’s duties effectively. She urged a daily regimen that accounted for sufficient sleep, exercise, and completion of responsibilities. She advised about regularity using the example of the Monticello Female Seminary, an institution she encountered during her travels. The students began the day with two hours of domestic duties, because “a young lady, who will spend two hours a day at the wash-tub, or with a broom, is far more likely to have rosy cheeks, a finely-moulded form, and a delicate skin, than one who lolls all day in her parlor or chamber.”⁹³ The seminary also introduced into the daily schedule a system of Calisthenics, “a mode of curing distortions, particularly all tendencies to curvature of the spine; while, at the same time, it tends to promote

⁹² Ibid., 40.

⁹³ Ibid., 33.

grace of movement, and easy manners.”⁹⁴ Her use of the seminary as an example shows her intention to model the structures of the domestic sphere after the educational structure that she found to be effective.

The only way to prepare women to care for the health of their families was “by communicating that knowledge, in regard to the construction of the body, and the laws of health, which is the first principle of the medical profession.”⁹⁵ Accordingly, she gave a brief lesson on anatomy and physiology with illustrations to explain the “construction of the human frame” in her *Treatise*. She structured the system so that each part of the body functioned to a practical end. Many organs were primarily useful in their labor towards disposing of useless material, often from food the person consumed. She explained, “Food is constantly taken into the stomach, only a portion of which is fitted for the supply of the blood. All the rest has to be thrown out of the system, by various organs designed for this purpose.”⁹⁶ Each of these organs had a specific responsibility in maintaining the body’s health. Beecher wrote that the skin “has a similar duty to perform; and as it has so much larger a supply of blood, it is the chief organ in relieving the body of the useless and noxious parts of the materials which are taken for food.”⁹⁷ A balance existed in the natural design of the body, and when outside influences interfered with the natural balance, disease resulted.

She also outlined a way of living that promoted the healthy balance for which she aimed. “Medical men agree,” Beecher wrote, that the reported high mortality rates were the result of “mismanagement, in reference to fresh air, food, and clothing.”⁹⁸ In order to counter this mismanagement, Beecher challenged fashionable and popular practices in relation to

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

architecture, diet, and dress. She designed the ideal house, which she organized in a way that minimized domestic labor and maximized ventilation. She discussed the dangers of stimulants such as coffee, tea, tobacco, and alcohol, as well as the medical benefits of vegetarianism. She also condemned the fashions of the day that constricted breathing capacity and deformed women's spines.

Beecher's use of illustrations signals a step forward in the profession she created for herself as a reformer—one who took a scientific as well as moral approach analyzing society and offering suggestions for improvement. Her illustrations depicted what she deemed useful medical knowledge for women as mothers, teachers, and health-keepers. What Beecher omitted in her illustrations has ambiguous meaning. None of her diagrams depicted the body below the waist, nor did they show female-specific body parts. Perhaps she hoped to maintain Christian virtue, which reveals much about how she still understood the body within the context of a moral worldview. On the other hand, she may have chosen not to portray the explicit medical differences between men and women to trivialize such distinctions and standardize the human body, and in effect show that men and women experience the same fundamental physical processes.

Her illustrations also evidence the trajectory of her health ideology. The first edition contained less material on the body than subsequent editions. She added more anatomical images and expanded on some of the original illustrations. For example, she modified an illustration of the skull and spinal column in the first edition (Figure 2) to include more detail, and she added the back perspective to accompany the original side perspective (Figure 3). It is not clear whether this decision was Beecher's or that of the publisher, but either way, Beecher responded to a demand for an expansion of the health section of her *Treatise*.

Figure 2. Beecher, *Treatise*, 1841 ed., 55.

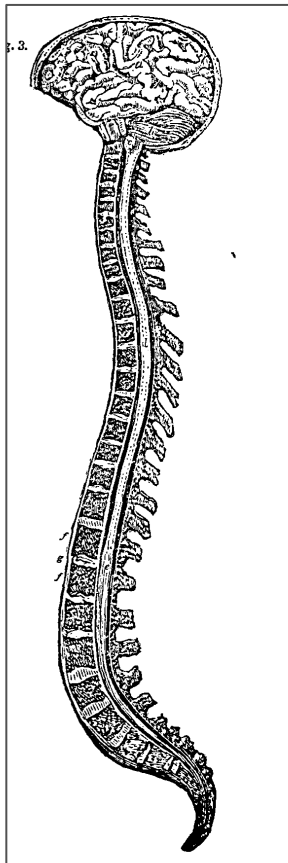
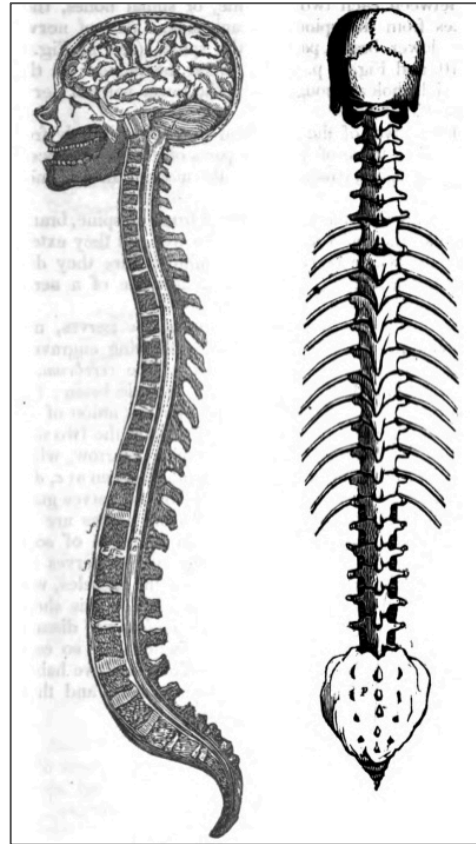


Figure 3. Beecher, *Treatise*, 1843 ed., 77.



The *Treatise* presented a chapter on mental health that exemplified her new focus on the notion that “there is such an intimate connection between the body and mind, that the health of one cannot be preserved, without a proper care of the other.”⁹⁹ She pushed her mental philosophy to the background to bring the laws of health to the fore. Improperly ventilated buildings, which caused their inhabitants to suffer from a lack of “duly oxygenated blood,” were the first cause of mental disease.¹⁰⁰ The house, thus, became a key actor in her economy of health. Second, mental taxation unaccompanied by sufficient fresh air exercise endangered the body and the mind. The physical signs were bloodshot, irritated eyes or psychological breakdown. Thirdly, mental

⁹⁹ Ibid., 186.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 187.

inactivity, or an unfulfilled potential of the mind, caused the nervous disease from which many women suffered at the time. Beecher proposed that women take up the profession of teaching young minds to solve this problem of insufficient mental stimulus. Thus, in the *Treatise*, she presented the laws of the mind in their relevance to the health of the body.

The house emerged as an environmental factor that inevitably affected the health of the family. The *Treatise* called attention to the organization of houses, demanding they facilitate the labor they enclosed. When Beecher managed the Stowe household while her sister Harriet worked on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she fixated on the elements that potentially upset the physical well-being of the family. She wrote in a letter, "This is a very cold house, in a bitter *cold* climate, though *dry and steady*," and she could not make the children comfortable without a furnace.¹⁰¹ This disturbed Beecher, whose celebrated *Treatise* had developed a means to achieving a healthy home. In short, the proper function of the home was the basic starting point from which children could improve.

Just as she directed her early reforms to the teaching profession, the focus of the *Treatise* was the profession of motherhood. A healthy household created physically and mentally virtuous citizens. Her explanation of the body, thus, was limited to what she deemed practical for the domestic profession. Although the *Treatise* was the first work in which Beecher described health as a key aspect of her ideology, it was understood only in its relationship with the system and order of the household and its role in women's lives as supervisors of the domestic structure. Knowledge of the body had not yet reached its height of importance in Beecher's ideology.

As she furthered her public presence as a writer, Beecher frequented water cure establishments to treat her personal ailments. In 1846, she publicly supported hydropathy as an effective cure for disease in an article published in the *New York Observer*. She wrote after the

¹⁰¹ Catharine Beecher to Mary Foote Perkins, September 27, 1851, Yale University Library.

success of her recent therapy at the well-renowned Brattleboro establishment. Rejecting the perception that hydropathy was an alternative system of medicine, Beecher called on physicians to overcome their prejudices that an Austrian peasant developed the method, for hydropathy was “found on examination to coincide exactly with the established principles of medical science and common sense.”¹⁰² It seems as though the water cure worked medical miracles; such was the experience of a friend who was a “confirmed invalid of fifteen or more years, coming here unable to walk half a mile, and in four months leaving, able to perform such exploits as climbing a mountain here.”¹⁰³

In praising the water cure as an effective treatment, she undermined physicians’ authority when she pointed out the “uncertainties of their profession” and their “hazardous mode of treatment.”¹⁰⁴ For example, doctors disagreed on whether the commonly prescribed opium was a stimulant or a sedative, and she showed how “five standard medical writers and physicians consider one of our most common and powerful drugs in five different and contradictory ways.”¹⁰⁵ Beecher recommended water cure establishments because they were places where one could find honest, knowledgeable, and benevolent physicians. Moreover, the water cure experience was educational. Physicians often failed to advise their patients on the laws of health, while no one went through the water cure “without carrying away clear views of what the laws of health are, and vigorous resolutions to obey them in future and to secure obedience to them from all under their control.”¹⁰⁶ In this sense, the therapy was also a crash course on anatomy and physiology, imparting knowledge that patients could apply in their private homes.

¹⁰² Catharine Beecher, “Miss Beecher on the Water Cure,” *New York Observer* 24 no. 43 (Oct 24, 1846).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

The *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* perceived Beecher's article on hydropathy as an explicit attack on the medical profession. The journal's editor called her the "god-mother to hydropathy" who wrote to "cast a slur upon the profession of medicine," and he suggested that women ought to be at home attending to duties instead of spending time at water cure establishments.¹⁰⁷ He undermined her credibility by referring to her as a "patroness" who sought to show off her knowledge while advertising for Dr. Wesselhoeft and his Brattleboro establishment. Condescendingly, the journal concluded, "We hope, therefore, Miss Beecher will not see fit to inform the world what new crotchet she may have in her head, or what new humbug she intends to support."¹⁰⁸

Beecher promptly defended her credibility, restating her position of authority on the subject of health. It was her experience that gave her a valid perspective, as she explained, "During the last five years I have travelled extensively in the northern, middle and western States, and owing to my health, have been brought in contact with many of the most learned and intelligent physicians." She observed over those years "the declining confidence of the most intelligent classes in the prevailing regular system of medical practice," and particularly their reluctance towards drugs. She also noticed physicians' perception that hydropathy declared "war against the *very principles* and the *only principles* by which the regular practice of medicine is sustained." Beecher discussed the tensions between regular medicine and alternative systems of medicine, and how alternative practices always start out as such until they prove effective and physicians incorporate it into their realm of regular medicine. She supported her stance with the European example, where hydropathy had "become a part of the regular medical and surgical

¹⁰⁷ "The Water Cure," *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 35, no. 18 (Dec 2, 1846).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

practice.” She thus furthered her authority by claiming she was outside of these tensions, and saw the truth between conflicting theories.¹⁰⁹

In 1855, Beecher asserted herself even further as an authority on health with the publication of her *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness*. She delved deeply into the bodily system, providing much more detail than she had in the *Treatise*. This time, her anatomical and physiological descriptions were not just the practical minimum needed to complete domestic duties; rather, she provided the general population with a “full knowledge” on health. Beecher’s intention, as stated in her introduction to *Letters to the People*, was to expose the public to medical knowledge. She was certain, due to her lifelong experience with sickness, that a complete and accessible guide to the human body was the missing piece to the formula for perfect health. She wrote, “More than half of the mature years of my own life have been those of restless debility and infirmities, that all would have been saved by the knowledge contained in this work.”¹¹⁰ She also explicitly carved out the crucial duty of women as the health-keepers of the family. She wrote that, as wife, mother, educator, nurse, and house-keeper, “Woman is the Heaven-appointed guardian of health in the family, as the physician is in the community; and though her duties are not as extensive or as complicated, they are more minute and constant, and equally important.”¹¹¹ Thus, an education on the laws of health—one as complete as that given to medical students—was a crucial aspect of the training of females’ professions.

She demonstrated a more scientific approach to health in 1855. Whereas she had previously used an argument logically grounded in mental philosophy to describe the mind-body relationship, now she used the laws of health to describe the “organs of the mind or spirit,” as she

¹⁰⁹ Catharine Beecher, “Reply to a Review of Miss Beecher’s Letter,” *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 35, no. 22 (Dec 30, 1846).

¹¹⁰ Catharine Beecher, *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 10.

¹¹¹ Beecher, *Letters to the People*, 186.

titled one of her chapters. Rather than understanding the mind and its behavior as an abstract domain of habit, will, memory, and language, among other mental activities, it was now part of an intricate network dispersed throughout the entirety of the body (Figure 4). She explained, “All the nerves of motion and sensation are connected with that part of the brain that thinks, feels, and chooses, and this is supposed to be the seat of the mind.” She discussed how the mind reacted to sensory environmental effects, but most of the body’s behavior “goes forward without any knowledge or control of the mind.”¹¹² The power of the mind, on which she based her *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, somewhat diminished in her new understanding of the body. Since the mind must yield to nature in some cases, the only thing left in one’s power was to understand the natural processes of the body so that one can properly maintain it and avoid disorder. The supreme rule concerning mental health, in Beecher’s understanding, was to “take care that all the faculties and susceptibilities of the mind and body be duly exercised so as to secure a well-balanced mind in a healthful body.”¹¹³ Balance, in short, was the harmonious perfection of the human condition that Americans could attain through proper conduct. This balance required a new focus on the body, which Beecher believed Americans had long neglected because of their intellectual and moral priorities.

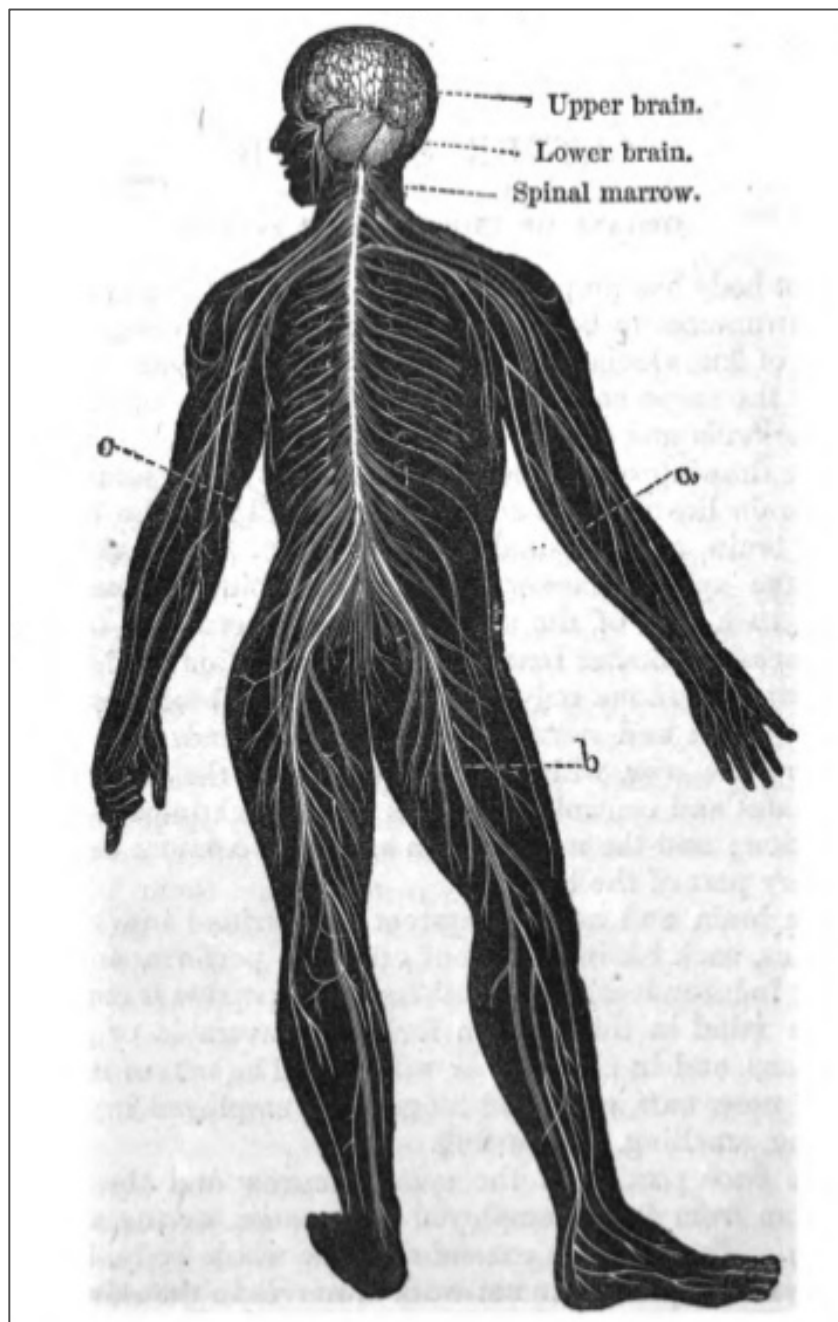
She tied morality to health status by embedding the spirit into the physical bodily system. She wrote, “Diseased and debilitated nerves are probably the cause of as much sin as they are of suffering. Thousands of cases of spiritual stupidity and darkness would be effectually remedied by restoring health and healthful avocations.”¹¹⁴ She thought that ministers should learn the laws of health in order to preach from the pulpit that they are synonymous with the laws of God. In

¹¹² Ibid., 43.

¹¹³ Ibid., 86.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 185.

Figure 4. Catharine Beecher, *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness*, 42.



fact, Christians “commit sin when they violate these laws, as really as when they swear, or steal, or break the Sabbath.”¹¹⁵ Whereas women guarded the family, the clergy had an important influence on the behavior of adults, so Beecher urged the ministerial profession to latch on to her teachings and thus focus on physical condition as it corresponds to the moral.

Just as Beecher differentiated the health-related duties of women from that of the clergy and the medical profession, she also differentiated herself as an authority on the subject of health from the medical mainstream. She publicly criticized the abuses of drug treatments. She had little success with drugs in her own experience, recalling, “For the cutaneous difficulty various washes and drugs were recommended, which never made any impression. One very celebrated physician directed a *teaspoonful of sulphur before every meal for five or six months*. This was obeyed without any good result.” She diagnosed her own problems, stating “this affection commenced when outdoor exercise ceased and confinement to school commenced, about at the age of nineteen.”¹¹⁶ She argued that the means towards good health was in the people’s own hands, and doctors had little restorative power compared to the effects of personal behavior and therapeutic nature.

Beecher also carved out her unique contribution to the field of health when she presented her own statistical evidence to reveal the plight of married women in America. Married women, Beecher presumed, were disproportionately diseased, so they were the subject of her study. Instead of differentiating women anatomically and discussing reproductive health, she marked women out as different by the specific behaviors of their domestic profession. Her approach was as follows: “I requested each lady first to write the initials of ten of the married ladies with whom she was best acquainted in her place of residence. Then she was requested to write at each name,

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 185.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 115.

her impressions as to the health of each lady.” Beecher collected the personal observations from other women, using her own framework that considered her personal experience a source of valid information. She claimed to have collected data from “two hundred different places in almost all the Free States.”¹¹⁷ She also took into account a margin of error by stating that the uncertainty of her results that leaned towards underrepresenting the sick.

She presented her statistics in two formats, and she split the data into three sets based on their reliability. The first were the “most reliable statistics,” which were in the form of a descriptive list of the ten women in each town investigated. The following are two examples from the list Beecher presented:

Milwaukee, Wis. Mrs. A. frequent sick headaches. Mrs. B. very feeble. Mrs. S. well, except chills. Mrs. L. poor health constantly. Mrs. D. subject to frequent headaches. Mrs. B. very poor health. Mrs. C. consumption. Mrs. A. pelvic displacements and weakness. Mrs. H. pelvic disorders and a cough. Mrs. B. always sick. Do not know one perfectly healthy woman in the place.¹¹⁸

The results of her project resemble the way in which she documented health in her correspondences. Just as she had gathered information from her personal relationships, she now asked other women to do the same and report back to her. Beecher introduced a unique method of statistical gathering in which the data described social networks of married women, which she then pieced together a picture of the general health status.

The second format was a table that presented data from women who only used the parameters of healthy, delicate, or chronically invalid, which Beecher considered less reliable since constrained to these three descriptions (Figure 5). She then presented her own observations in the manner she requested of her fellow surveyors. After listing the states of her married sisters, sister-in-laws, cousins, and friends, she added, “I am not able to recall, in my immense circle of

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 122.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 124-5.

friends and acquaintance all over the Union, so many as ten married ladies born in this century and country, who are perfectly sound, healthy, and vigorous.”¹¹⁹ Finally, she demonstrated the generational decline in health. Her statistics took on the quality of a retrospective study in her method of comparing older women’s recollections of the state of her peers forty years ago with the observations of their married daughters.¹²⁰ Beecher’s statistical method aimed to expose the deteriorated state of married women to mobilize a support for improved physical education, especially for women.

Figure 5. Beecher, *Letters to the People*, 127.

Residence.	Strong and perfectly Healthy.	Delicate or Diseased.	Habitual Invalids.
Hudson, Michigan	2	4	4
Castleton, Vermont	Not one.	9	1
Bridgeport, “	4	4	2
Dorset, “	Not one.	1	9
South Royalston, Mass....	4	2	4
Townsend, Vermont.....	4	3	3
Greenbush, New York....	2	5	3
Southington, Connecticut.	3	5	2
Newark, New Jersey.....	2	3	5
New York City	2	4	4
Oneida, New York	3	2	5
Milwaukee, Wisconsin....	1	3	6
Rochester, New York.....	2	6	2
Plainfield, New Jersey....	2	4	4
New York City	3	6	1
Lennox, Massachusetts...	4	3	3
Union Vale, New York...	2	5	3
Albany, “	2	3	5
Hartford, Conn.	1	5	4
Cincinnati, Ohio.....	1	4	5
Andover, Mass.....	2	5	3
Brunswick, Maine	2	5	3

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 129.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 131.

The plight of married women had far-reaching significance, affecting both men and women, for Beecher urged her readers to “consider also that ‘man that is born of a woman’ depends on her not only for the constitutional stamina with which he starts in life, but for all he receives during the developments of infancy and the training of childhood.”¹²¹ Therefore, although she addressed the work to the people in general, women were Beecher’s focus because of their fundamental influence on the community’s overall health.

Beecher did not only expose the diminishing health status of women, but she also gave reasons for the decline and solutions in her *Letters to the People*. She especially condemned modes of dress that disrupted the natural order of the body, fashions that she believed were “exactly calculated to produce disease and deformity.”¹²² Fashion was in direct opposition to nature, as it encouraged women to obtain the “fashionable waist” that dangerously displaced internal organs, deformed the rib cage, and obstructed lung expansion (Figures 6 and 7).¹²³ Additionally, the excess fabric of dresses “debilitates the spine and pelvic organs by excess of heat.”¹²⁴ Beecher offered an alternative aesthetic, one that promoted a classical beauty, and in doing so, she turned to ancient Greco-Roman sources. Beecher’s fondness of the classical aesthetic cohered with a lifestyle that abided by laws of nature. In her physiological description, “Clothing is useful only as it prevents the passing off of heat faster than the capillaries can keep up the supply.”¹²⁵ Her scientific description of clothing supported a simplification of female dress patterns, using the minimum amount of material. She demanded that clothing be loose and supported by the shoulders rather than the waist, so as not interfere with the natural order of the body. Fashion was an environmental force that impeded on individuals’ health and conflicted

¹²¹ Ibid., 133.

¹²² Ibid., 89.

¹²³ Ibid., 93.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 55.

Figure 6. Beecher, *Letters to the People*, 177.

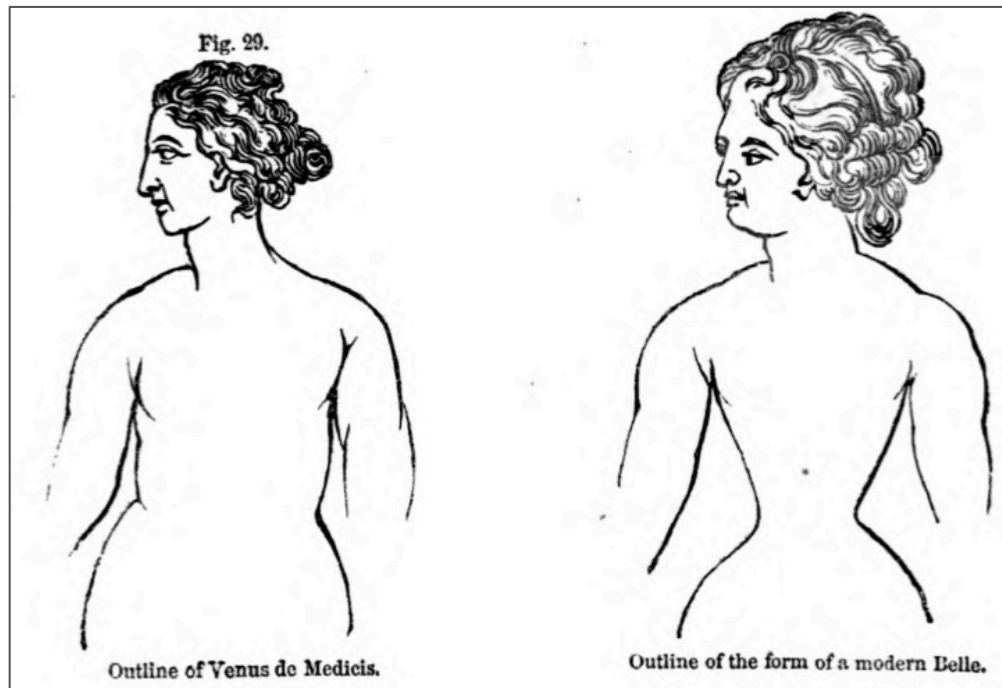
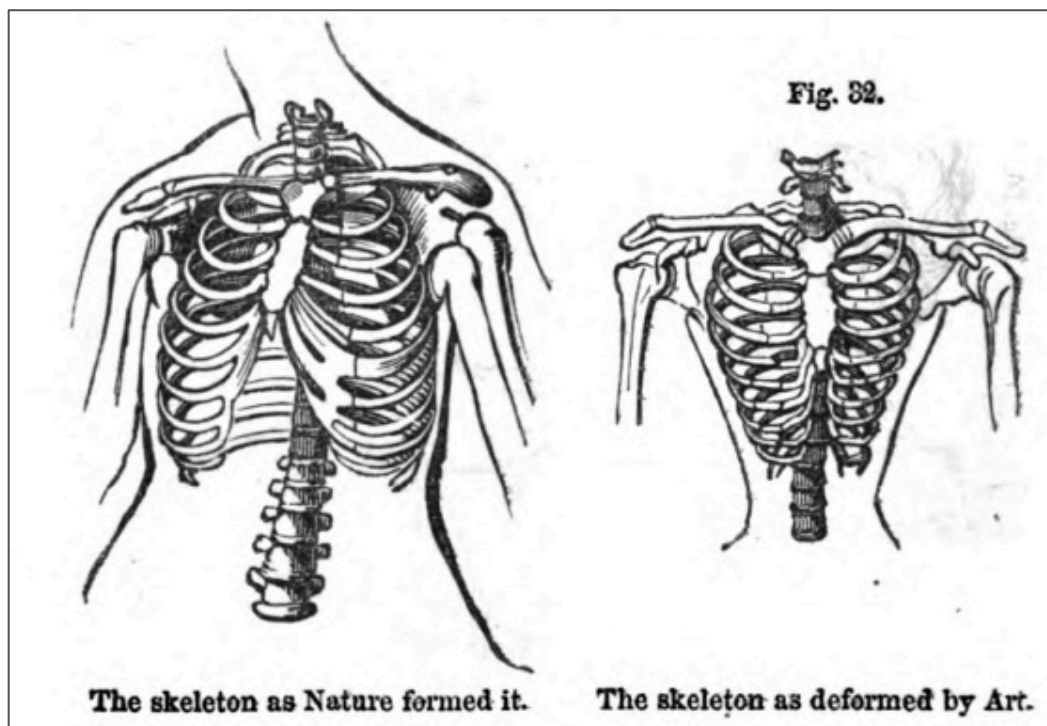


Figure 7. Beecher, *Letters to the People*, 177.



with the Beecher's health reforms because it upset the body's inherent balance.

Improper ventilation was another physical abuse she exposed in *Letters to the People*. The house determined the economy of health, a concept she had demonstrated in her *Treatise* but developed further in later writings. The common people were ignorant of "the idea that every pair [of lungs] needs a hogshead of pure air every hour," Beecher wrote. She continued, "If society understood this subject as it will some day be considered, there would be health-officers to inspect every house in the land, and bring indictments for crime against every man that arranges to poison himself and his family by an unhealthy atmosphere."¹²⁶ Beecher charged the medical profession with largely ignoring the subject of bad ventilation's adverse effects on health, and "not one in a hundred even of those who have studied physiology, and consider pure air as important to health, really know what is necessary to secure a proper ventilation."¹²⁷ Thus, Beecher prescribed proper ventilation with the ground plans she presented in several publications.¹²⁸ She approached architecture with practical aims; her method emphasized efficiency and ensured the maximum health of inhabitants.

A review of *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* was skeptical of Beecher's account, noting that she unwittingly exaggerated the extent of health decline in the nation, "for, as an invalid, and as an habituée of divers hydropathic and other sanitary establishments, she must, within the last few years, have been in peculiarly intimate conversance with what of disease and infirmity exists."¹²⁹ Nonetheless, the review commended Beecher's work and suggested that even medical doctors heed her warnings and advice. Another review of her book

¹²⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹²⁸ See: Beecher, *Treatise* (1841); Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J.B. Ford & Co, 1869); Beecher, *Miss Beecher's Housekeeper and Healthkeeper* (1873).

¹²⁹ "Review 2 – No Title," *The North American Review* Vol. LXXXI, No. CLXIX (1855).

pointed out the fault of marriage as an institution. “Our hope of escaping the evils described by Miss Beecher,” according to the reviewer, “lies in uniting the labor of man and woman, giving woman an opportunity for manly labor and exercise in the open air, and in stopping that greatest drain on her life and vital energy—involuntary propagation.”¹³⁰ This interpretation of Beecher’s *Letters to the People* demonstrates a negative opinion towards the division of labor that Beecher so strongly supported throughout her life. Although Beecher described the deteriorated state that characterized married women in particular, she did not understand the decline as a result of marriage; rather, it was the result of ignorance and unhealthy behavior. The critic also raised the question of birth control that Beecher had thoroughly avoided.¹³¹ Instead of following Beecher’s regimen of physical education and health-promoting activity, some readers extracted the message that marriage, in itself, was a societal abuse.

A year after the publication of *Letters to the People*, Harpers published *Physiology and Calisthenics: For the Use of Schools and Families*, a textbook-like publication where Beecher provided Americans with the basic means to good health—that is, education on the laws of health and an organized exercise regimen that she called Calisthenics. Beecher recalled that her “interest was awakened in this direction [Calisthenics] by works published in France and England”—volumes that Elizabeth Blackwell, one of the first practicing female doctors in America, referred to her.¹³² From there, Beecher discovered the work of Swedish philanthropist Per Henrik Ling, who “directed special attention to anatomy, physiology, and connected sciences, in order to perfect a system of exercises in harmony with nature. He assumed the principle of never adopting any movement till he could detect its exact effects on the whole

¹³⁰ “Health of Women,” *Circular* 5, 8 (1856).

¹³¹ See: William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980).

¹³² Beecher, *Letters to the People*, 119.

organism, and apply it to use scientifically.”¹³³ Ling’s approach attracted Beecher because of its scientific quantification of exercise, and his gymnastics promoted “harmony between mind and body.”¹³⁴ The health manuals of her time held that domestic labor was sufficient exercise for women, but Beecher encouraged an organized system that ensured a desired result. Ling directed his exercises to military training, and all his illustrations portray males (Figures 8-9). Beecher’s *Calisthenics* adapted Ling’s system, but she expanded its use, directing the exercises to the common people with illustrations of both girls and boys (Figures 10-11).

Beecher incorporated her new physical education into her mission establishing schools in the West. Along with emphasizing the laws of health in the curriculum, Beecher paid special attention to establishing Calisthenics programs in new schools. For instance, she insisted on her Milwaukee Female College’s need for a “Calisthenics Hall, on a model which will soon appear in a book of mine on Calisthenics that the Harpers will issue in a few weeks.”¹³⁵ The model to which she referred appeared in her 1856 *Physiology and Calisthenics*. She designed the ideal structure for students to perform Calisthenics. “Stations” gave each student space to exercise and a “walking path” went around the entire room. Beecher claimed to be the first in America to set up this organized system of exercises to improve health and prevent disease.¹³⁶ Her goal as the inventor of American Calisthenics was not only to reform physical education in schools, but in a more general sense, to provide corrective measures necessary for the excessive mental and spiritual taxation that distinguished America from the Old World.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Per Henrik Ling, *Gymnastic Free Exercises*, trans. M. Roth, M.D, Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1853.

¹³⁵ Catharine Beecher to Increase Lapham, 6 November, 1855, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives Department.

¹³⁶ Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences*, 43.

Figure 8. Per Henrik Ling, found in *Gymnastic Free Exercises*, trans. M. Roth, M.D., Columbia University Health Sciences Library.

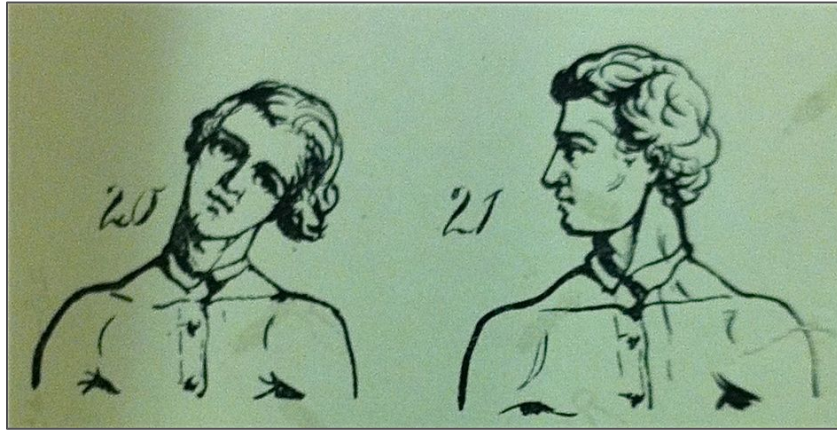


Figure 9. Ling, *Gymnastic Free Exercises*, Columbia University Health Sciences Library.

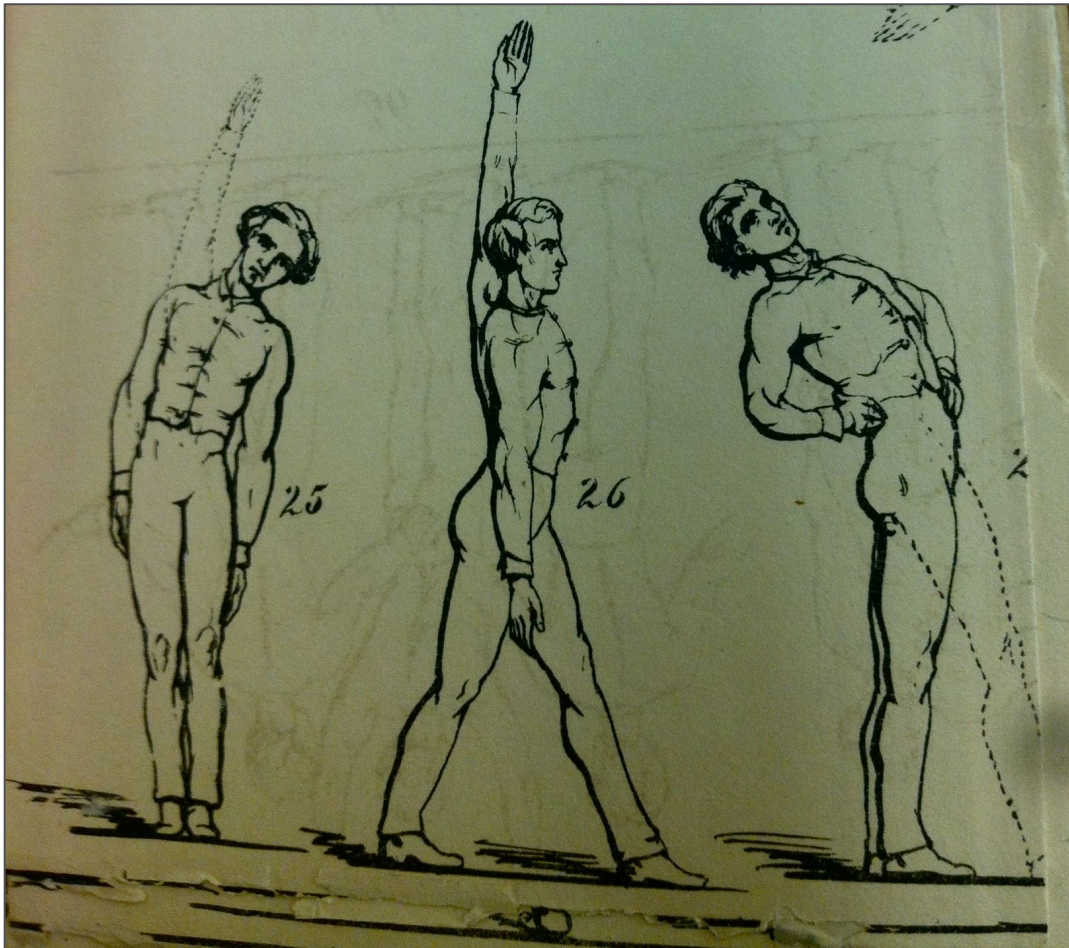
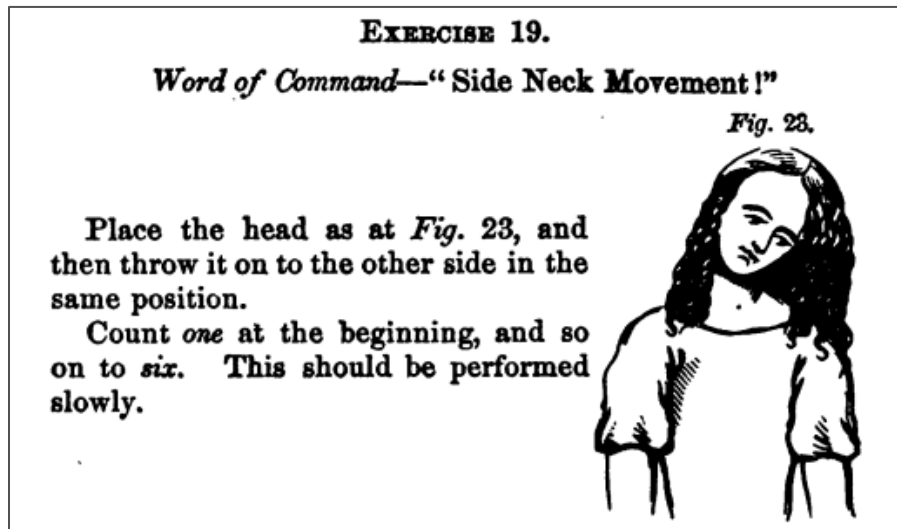
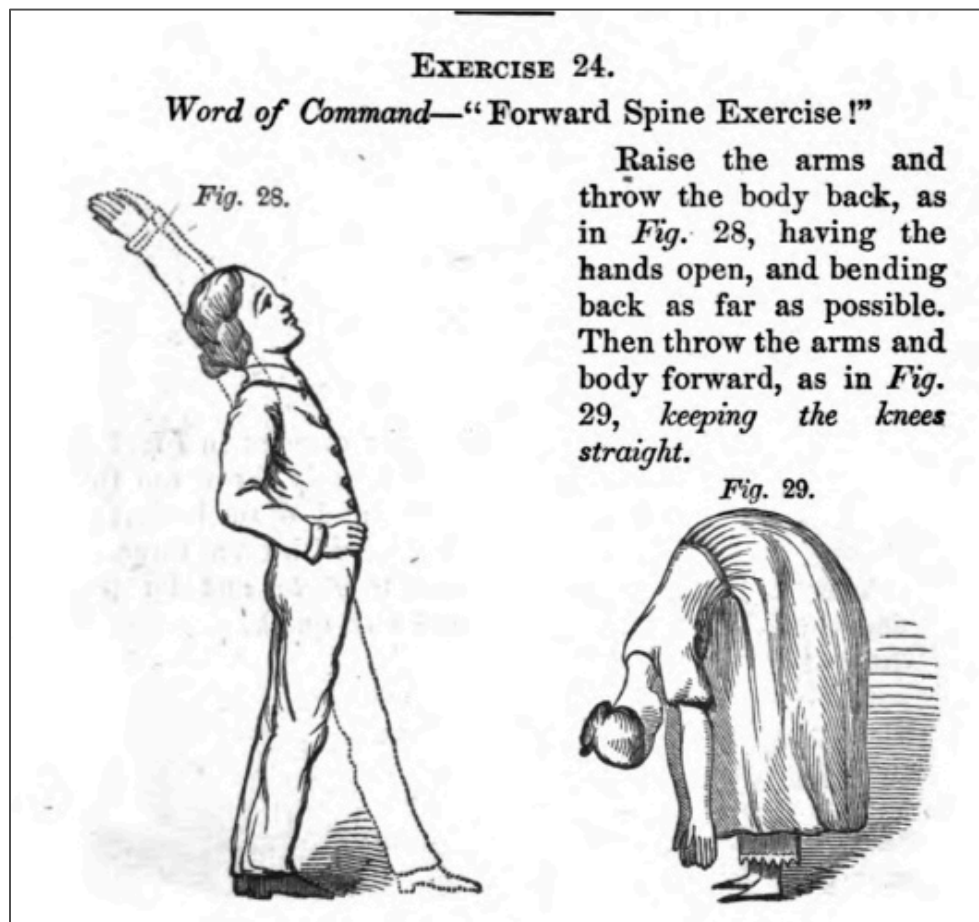


Figure 10. Beecher, *Calisthenics*, 22.Figure 11. Beecher, *Calisthenics*, 24.

As Beecher focused on ways to improve health, nutrition became a special focus in her writing. She introduced food's relationship to health in her 1841 *Treatise*, but she emphasized diet even more in subsequent writings. Once again, the idea of balance prevailed in the realm of consumption. At the time she published *Letters to the People* in 1855, there existed various schools of thought on nutrition. Some advocated vegetarianism while others claimed animal products alone were nutritious, but Beecher dismissed such extremes and argued instead that the consumer's physiological knowledge was of utmost importance. Thereby, people could judge nutritional quality and practice "habits of self-control and principles of duty" to secure the desired dietary balance.¹³⁷ Her 1873 *Miss Beecher's Housekeeper and Healthkeeper*, not to be confused with a typical cookbook, was a "complete encyclopedia of all that relates to woman's duties as housekeeper, wife, mother, and nurse."¹³⁸ It commenced with the rules of health regarding food and drink, and she further outlined the "needful science and training for the family state" to accompany the book's hundreds of recipes.¹³⁹ In describing what entailed a healthy diet, she warned against the damaging effects of stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine. She staunchly criticized the use of tobacco, demonstrated by her notes on a sermon she addressed to women. The rise in the popularity of smoking as a social activity concerned Beecher, who noted, "We find ourselves called upon to a new class of experiences and consequent duties which as yet have not been touched upon by our revered instructors in the pulpit."¹⁴⁰ Women, who generally did not smoke, had the power to halt the vice of smoking that pervaded male culture.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 97.

¹³⁸ Catharine Beecher, *Miss Beecher's Housekeeper and Healthkeeper: Containing Five Hundred Recipes for Economical and Healthful Cooking; Also, Many Directions for Securing Health and Happiness* (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1873), 15.

¹³⁹ Beecher, *Miss Beecher's Housekeeper and Healthkeeper*, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Catharine Beecher, "A Sermon on Tobacco, by a Lady Addressed to Her Own Sex," Schlesinger Library.

Beecher engaged so closely with physical education that it showed through in her private letters. When her brother-in-law Calvin Stowe had been suffering from digestive problems, Beecher lectured him on the laws of health, writing, “there is nothing in your constitution or in the nature of your disease that would prevent your being a long-lived *healthful* and *very* happy man, if you would only *conscientiously obey the laws of health*. The grand impediment is a *diseased appetite* which constantly leads you to tax brain and nerves and every bodily function.”¹⁴¹ The message she communicated to her readers was also a message she carried with her in her personal life. She similarly asserted her authority on physical knowledge regarding the issue of her father’s illness. In a letter to William White, her effort to persuade him to support her opinion was as follows:

I feel so uneasy to have my father shut up in brick walls in Brooklyn when he could be in such a beautiful country home as my brother’s when he would be amused by the out door scenes he used so much to enjoy. My brother working in his garden would be a daily source of enjoyment and the fresh country air and out door amusements he would find there – would be so exactly what he needs that I cannot rest until I have done all in my power to secure them to him; more especially so as they are expressly endorsed by his physician.¹⁴²

She insisted on what was best for Lyman because of her special knowledge on matters of health. She explained the positive effects of fresh air and exercise, which she had fervently advocated in her published writings. She worried about his confinement in what she described as an unhealthy living situation in Brooklyn. Whereas in her early letters, she mentioned health in a passive and descriptive manner, by the latter period of her life, she invoked her medical wisdom to become actively involved in the health of her loved ones.

Although it was not until the 1840’s that she began to implement physical education and the 1850’s to foreground health, Beecher’s concern for the physical well-being of Americans grew out of her earlier experiences. During her tours throughout the free states, she absorbed

¹⁴¹ Catharine Beecher to Calvin Stowe, September 10, 1870, Schlesinger Library.

¹⁴² Catharine Beecher to William White, July 13 1862, Yale University Library.

enough information about the general state of the American people to confidently expose and address a problem. In her understanding, women had the power to treat and prevent disease in a way that was outside of the medical profession's reach. She challenged the female reader to use her influence to heal the family and maintain its health, and she asked of her, "Will you, my friend, consider what you can do to save all around you from the destructive influence of a poisoned atmosphere?"¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Beecher, *Letters to the People*, 186.

Conclusion

“It is my most earnest desire,” Catharine Beecher wrote in 1873, “to save you and your household from the sad consequences I have suffered from ignorance of the *laws of health*, especially those which women need to understand and obey.”¹⁴⁴ She made clear that both her suffering and her health knowledge gave her the means to impart valid lessons to her readers. Beecher always aimed to elevate the domestic labor that entailed women’s duties, but it was not until she experienced sickness and learned about its causes and effects that she began to understand health as a key component of women’s duties. She ultimately advanced that the nation’s health depended on women, which necessitated a heightened training in physical education.

Before Beecher reached a level of knowledge on physiology and anatomy that allowed her to self-identify as an expert on the subject, she had taken note of the health of others and had personally experienced the adversities she would later publicize. The phases of her life that preceded her health focus—her adolescence, her years at Hartford Female Seminary, her travels West—gave her a personal interest in health and a bank of experiences to which she referred as a health reformer.

A number of environmental influences disrupted the natural order of the body, as Beecher understood it. Unhealthy practices, such as fashionable modes of dress, poor house construction, and dietary excesses, interfered with the natural potential towards perfectibility. Beecher’s perception that people were oblivious to daily abuses further motivated her reforms, which addressed women and their ability to combat such problems with their special influence. The concept that culture could correct one’s nature, namely through education, dominated Beecher’s

¹⁴⁴ Beecher, *Miss Beecher’s Housekeeper and Healthkeeper*, 16.

ideology in the earlier stages of her career. But as she perceived Americans' growing health problem and accumulated knowledge, she shifted her focus towards elements of culture that damaged one's nature, and she thus came to foreground health in her ideology.

“No one that watches the gradual advancement of society, and the gain of light upon darkness over the whole world, can hesitate in the belief that this nation *eventually* will be perfected in character, as intelligent, virtuous, and free,” Beecher wrote in opposition to the growing Woman's Rights movement in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴⁵ Women simply did not need the vote because “there is no *real* social evil to which woman is now subjected which is not fully in her power to remedy.”¹⁴⁶ Women themselves posed the biggest obstacle to their happiness by failing to fully understand the impact of domestic responsibilities, failing to undergo the necessary training for these responsibilities, and failing to fulfill their duties because of ignorance and the depleted health that resulted. In Beecher's utopian vision, Americans would enjoy full equality between the sexes because women's professions would hold the same value as men's professions. Beecher promoted a division of labor between men and women, who were naturally equal in condition, which defined separate responsibilities so that the two could efficiently lead America to prominence as a nation of dutiful Christians.

To guide the American people on the path to perfection, she did not simply write domestic manuals and cookbooks; rather, she wrote treatises, textbooks, and encyclopedias. Her physical education, which instructed on anatomy, physiology, and the laws of health, countered the overwhelming ignorance of Americans—women especially—regarding their bodies and the causes of illness. Her architecture plans countered the ill-ventilated homes that predisposed families to disease. Her recipes countered digestive ailments and promoted healthy nutrition. Her

¹⁴⁵ Catharine Beecher, *The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Woman* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and co., 1851), 233.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

Calisthenics countered the mental and moral over-exertion that she believed typified Protestant American cultural practice.

Still, aside from unhealthy social practices, the overarching cause of health decline was society's low value of domestic labor. Beecher tackled the problem by making women the nation's "health-keepers," a term she seems to have invented to suit her redefinition of women's duty.¹⁴⁷ With public health at stake, Beecher urged Americans to revalue domestic labor to the status of the esteemed male professions. She strove to bring systematic change to the education and training of women, using male professions' requisite training at endowed institutions to model the reforms she proposed. The health problems Beecher perceived resulted from a vicious cycle in which society's health depended on women, but women were unable to perform their duties because of society's failure to value their labor.

What was the ultimate purpose of Beecher's health focus? Her nationalistic language did not imply a geopolitical goal to create a physically fit citizenry superior to those of other nations. Rather, the end point was individual happiness through Christian fulfillment. Such national imperative indicated the link she established between Protestant values and civic responsibility. As she redefined Christian duty in contrast to the Calvinists' requirement of a conversion experience, she developed a formulaic path to happiness. The proper behavior she prescribed to the people would help them achieve a harmonious balance between the mental and physical pursuits pertaining to their specific duties. It was only when that balance was found that individuals could experience true spiritual happiness and the nation could achieve its democratic promise.

¹⁴⁷ A search of the term "health-keeper" in ProQuest's American Periodicals Series Online shows that Catharine Beecher was the first to use the word.

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