

A Critical Presentation of the Life and Work of Franz Anton Mesmer MD and Its Influence on the Development of Hypnosis

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Abstract

Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) is affectionately referred to as the “Father of Hypnosis” by hypnotherapists and most textbooks on the subject would at least mention his name. In his prime, the name Mesmer was almost synonymous with controversy. Personally investigated by King Louis XVI of France in 1784 through a royal commission, exiled from Vienna, healing thousands of patients, worshipped by tens of thousands, branded a charlatan by the medical profession, enrapturing large swathes of 1770 Europe in the throes of “animal magnetism”, imprisoned for treason, but the list goes on.

The life of Dr Mesmer is detailed from his childhood to his death. We discover that Mesmer did not practise hypnosis per se but his own unique form of therapy. Mesmer in fact, did not believe that the imagination had anything to do with the efficacy of his therapy. Instead he fervently believed in the power of animal magnetism and an all-pervasive cosmic force termed “universal fluid”.

This article attempts to throw some light on the enigmatic Dr Mesmer, his practise of animal magnetism and aims to look critically at the available material on this Viennese physician.

The Young Mesmer

Dr Mesmer was born Master Friedrich Anton Mesmer in 1734, the son of a poor gardener in the village of Iznang, Swabia, north of Lake Constance. His family was not well-to-do, Mesmer having eight other siblings and his parents being somewhat reliant on the Church for financial support.

Mesmer was considerably well-educated, being a student of theology at the University of Ingolstadt and re-entered University at the relatively mature age of 25. He actually applied successfully in 1759 to the Faculty of Law at the University of Vienna but seems to have had a change of heart and decided to become a physician, studying medicine instead.

To successfully graduate as a physician, Mesmer was required, in his final year, to submit a dissertation and successfully defend it in the presence of a university panel. In 1766, Mesmer found himself in this position and duly submitted his dissertation entitled *Dissertatio Physico-Medica de Planetarum Influxu*, loosely translated as “On the Influence of the Planets on the Human Body”.

The title is somewhat misleading, giving the impression that Mesmer’s work was about astrology but this was not the case. Mesmer in fact, vehemently despised astrologists, condemning them for “swindling people out of the contents of their purses, thanks to a skill filled with deceit”. In reality, his work was an essay in Newtonian physics, stating since oceanic tides exist, it would not be inconceivable that atmospheric tides do exist as well. Since gravity affects the tides of the sea, it would logically follow that the atmospheric tides would be affected by gravity as well. The variation in atmospheric tides was stated to be linked to the variation in disease. This idea was not novel – the British physician Richard Mead wrote about it more than half a century ago in his *De Imperio Solis ac Lunae in Corpora Humana et Morbis Inde Oriundis*.

It is alleged that he copied large sections, almost verbatim from Mead’s treatise.

When portions of Mead’s and Mesmer’s writings were laid out side by side, striking similarities were seen. It is unfortunate that this author is unable to compare both articles in their entirety due to lack of access. It is even more unfortunate that this author is not well-versed in Latin, in which both manuscripts have been written and is unable to make any authoritative comment. The author is, however, inclined to the view that Mesmer did indeed copy certain sections of Mead’s work.

Whilst it is clear that Mead’s work makes more than a passing appearance in Mesmer’s dissertation, to Mesmer’s credit, students in the 18th century were not expected to be original and he did successfully defend his work in the presence of a University panel, comprising the Dean and another faculty member.

In addition, Mesmer expounded on Mead’s theory, proposing that instead of the indirect action of gravity on the human body via the atmospheric tides, there was an agent, which he called “universal fluid” that being subject to an eternal ebb and flow, affected planetary and human bodies alike. This “universal fluid” was alleged to have a “tidal effect” within the human body, the movements of the flow in a healthy body in synchrony with the universe. Mesmer went further, adding that the above fluid was the “material cause of gravitation” or the “cause of material gravitation”, which led to a force he termed “animal gravity”.

The importance of his dissertation is that the key concept of “animal gravity” which Mesmer later renamed “animal magnetism” would play a crucial role in his controversial therapy.

The University of Vienna accepted his unique, if somewhat unorthodox dissertation, and in 1766, Dr Mesmer, in line with orthodox medical practice of that age, was licensed to bleed, blister and purge.

The Beginnings of Animal Magnetism

It would appear that for the next eight years Dr Mesmer ran an orthodox medical practice in Landstrasse, a chic district in Vienna, bleeding, blistering, and purging patients as necessary. His marriage to a rich, aristocratic widow, Anna von Bosch, allowed him to acquire the house in which he practised.

In July 1773, the letters of Leopold Mozart, father to the musical prodigy, revealed that Mesmer had a sickly patient by the name of Francisca Osterlin. From Mesmer's own writings we see a chronically ill, infirm young lady, whom Mesmer tried his best to help using his orthodox training. The senior Mozart's writings confirm this as well.

It seems that "the cyclical nature of her illness", much like the ebb and flow of his "universal fluid", led Mesmer to hit upon the idea of using an agent to control this elusive fluid. The agent which he decided to employ was a magnet because: a magnet's capacity to attract and repel bears a strong resemblance to the effect of the sun and moon on the ebb and flow of the tides; also a magnet seems to exert action at a distance rather like the gravitational effect.

The therapeutic application of magnets was not new. Indeed, less than a hundred years ago, in the seventeenth century, magnets were used in some treatments with pleasing results. Most practitioners preferred to adopt a low profile, staying just under the persecutory radar of the witch-hunters. There is little evidence to suggest that accounts of their methods and results survived this dark era.

Like the ebb and flow of Mesmer's universal fluid, magnetism was now to enjoy a brief resurgence.

In 1774, Mesmer asked the Professor of Astronomy at the University of Vienna, Reverend Maximilian Hell (1720 – 1790) if he would supply Mesmer with some magnets from his workshop. Hell readily agreed and Mesmer soon found that the magnets were efficacious in therapy, initially leading to an intensification of symptoms before their amelioration.

Father Hell was kept informed of the progress Dr Mesmer was making in the realms of magnetic therapy. Father Hell then wrote an article in which he appeared to be claiming credit for the origins of magnetic therapy. He also added that he considered the shape of the magnet fundamental to the efficacy of therapy. Naturally, this rankled Mesmer who subsequently replied with an article in which he claimed priority for the application of magnetic therapy and questioned Hell's proposition. Mesmer then brought up the concept of animal magnetism, which he explains in his reply to Father Hell, is distinctly different from mineral magnetism.

According to Mesmer, whilst a magnet may have the ability to channel animal magnetism, other substances could as well. Human beings had this ability too, although there was considerable variation in their ability to store animal magnetism. Mesmer added that only ten percent of the population was able to store this power to a marked degree. He felt that such a person might have a direct magnetic effect on a patient without having to rely on a magnet. It is not known how Mesmer came to these conclusions.

When Mesmer asked the Dean of the Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna to examine his evidence, he was turned down. His further attempts were futile. A report sent to the Berlin Academy of Sciences was rejected on the basis that whilst "magnets might have an effect on the human body... the cure of an illness was not a satisfactory criterion".

All this while, news of Mesmer spread from Vienna and his practice boomed, thronging with patients disillusioned with orthodox medicine.

In 1775, Mesmer was invited to Munich to demonstrate his methods before the Academy of Sciences. The Secretary of the Academy suffered from convulsions and to the amazement of the onlookers, Mesmer demonstrated control over these convulsions, inducing them by pointing his hand at the unfortunate Secretary and dispelling them with a mere drop of his wrist. For his efforts, Mesmer was bestowed with honorary membership of the Academy.

Upon his return to Vienna, he spent the next year quietly and in 1777 began his treatment on a patient that would forever change his life.

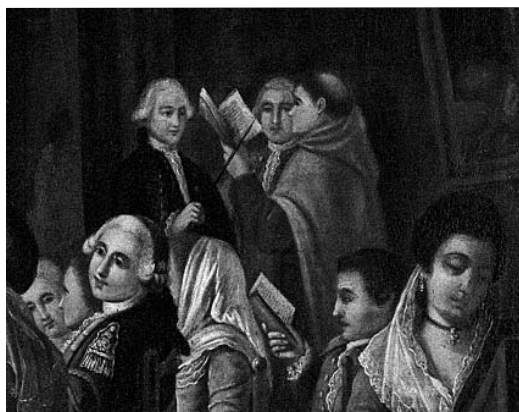


Figure 1: Anton Mesmer with an iron wand. He would use this to direct the flow of animal magnetism.

Maria Theresia von Paradis was an eighteen-year-old virtuoso pianist. Blind from the age of three, according to her father, had woken up one morning completely unable to see. Mesmer decided to treat her according to his principles and achieved an improvement – she could now make out light and shapes. Her parents were overjoyed and begged Mesmer to continue. However, several prominent physicians, apparently jealous at Mesmer's success, intimated to Herr von Paradis that his daughter had developed an inordinately strong attachment to Mesmer and that the Empress, his daughter's patron, might cease financial support were the girl to regain her sight. This eventually resulted in the return of the young girl to her family, where her eyesight deteriorated to its previous condition and Herr von Paradis's condemnation of Mesmer as a charlatan.

Not long afterwards, a commission investigating Mesmer's procedures concluded that "animal magnetism constituted a public menace and demanded that he put an end to his "fraudulent practice" or face expulsion from the medical body.

Mesmer thus decided to seek fertile and less hostile ground for his new therapy and moved to Paris.

Dr Mesmer goes to Paris – of Baquets and Bureaucrats

In 1778, armed with an introduction to the Austrian ambassador and accompanied by one manservant, the forty-four-year-old Mesmer arrived in Paris.

With the help of Charles Leroy, the President of the Royal Academy of Sciences, Mesmer was introduced as a speaker at one of the academy's meetings. It should be noted that Mesmer was not a good speaker– he spoke French poorly with a heavy German accent. Most of the assembly walked out until a mere twelve remained. During a subsequent demonstration on an asthmatic member of the Academy, the patient admitted feeling "tingling in his hands and currents running up and down his arms". Later Mesmer induced hallucinations of taste and smell.

During a later demonstration in a patient with dropsy, Mesmer astonished observers by increasing and decreasing the swelling with his touch. His scientific observers, whilst impressed, did not report their observations to the Academy, ostensibly for fear of ridicule.

Charles Leroy unwisely suggested that the effect might be produced by the patient's imagination. He was severely criticised by Mesmer, in person and later in print for having the audacity to raise such a baseless accusation. It is no wonder that Leroy broke off relations with Mesmer and allowed Mesmer's subsequent letters to go unanswered.

In this, Mesmer displayed attributes that were later responsible for his ultimate downfall – his almost petulant ungratefulness and his suspicious nature, bordering on the paranoid at times.

Undeterred by his failure with the French Academy of Sciences, Mesmer turned to the Royal Society of Medicine, with equal success. Admittedly, the doctors who examined his technique were prejudiced and the Secretary returned, unsealed, testimonials from Mesmer's patients, stating, "it was impossible for the Society to venture an opinion upon unfamiliar cases".

In May 1778, Mesmer moved to Creteil, a village outside Paris. Here the baquet was conceived. This device enabled him to treat up to thirty patients at a time. Its basic design was a “shallow wooden tub of up to fifteen feet in diameter and one to two feet deep. It also contained previously magnetised bottles of water, themselves submerged in magnetised water. Iron bars protruded from the surface and each patient was to apply afflicted parts of their body to the iron bar. Patients would link hands whilst sitting in the baquet to allow the magnetic fluid to circulate.

The baquets had many notable successes but it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss individual case histories. However, several of Mesmer’s successes involved patients of high social standing and he received much publicity as a result. Mesmer’s spreading influence allowed him to shift his operations to the prestigious Hotel Bullion where he had four baquets, one for the use of poor patients only. Seats at the other baquets were at a premium and had to be reserved well in advance.

With his growing success, demand began to outstrip supply and the poor flocked to the now over-crowded baquets. As a solution, Mesmer magnetised a large oak tree on rue de Bondy and hundreds of the poor attached themselves with cords to the tree in hope of a cure. It is not known how successful the tree was as a conductor of animal magnetism.

The baquet brought Mesmer untold wealth and amongst other aristocrats seeking relief from their maladies, a Dr Charles d’Eslon, private physician to the brother of King Louis XVI and an influential member at the Faculty of Medicine.

d’Eslon was convinced of the power of animal magnetism; he gives an account of how he himself was healed by Mesmer and was keen to help his mentor gain official recognition for his method.

He organised a dinner, after which Mesmer was to give a lecture on his theory. Inter-

ested members would then have the opportunity to observe theory put to practise at a hospital. Of the Faculty, a mere twelve were presented. Eight left after the meal; the remaining three deciding to attend Mesmer’s demonstration at the hospital. Mesmer, unhappy at this apparent snub, remarked that “it was easier to induce Parisian physicians to dinner than to persuade them to visit a hospital”.

The three seemingly interested physicians, attended fortnightly at the hospital over the next seven months. They witnessed several impressive cases, including that of an “almost blind girl who regained her sight”.

After the seven months and several remarkable cases, the physicians refused to be convinced, declaring that they had not examined the cases prior to treatment. In addition, they asserted that some illnesses and symptoms might spontaneously remit. They were also antagonistic and yet another professional society had proven itself impermeable to Mesmer and his “universal fluid”.

If there were places which were more receptive to Mesmer and animal magnetism, they were the hearts and minds of the common people. In 1779, Mesmer published ‘Memoire sur la Découverte du Magnetisme Animal’, a treatise on the topic, giving an account of his experiences in Vienna and twenty-seven propositions on the subject.

Of note is proposition 23, which states:

“... that facts will show that this principle, in accordance with the practical rules I shall establish, can immediately cure nervous complaints and indirectly, other illnesses.”

Here we see Mesmer acknowledging the therapeutic limitations of animal magnetism. He implies that nervous disorders may be readily cured whereas organic conditions may be alleviated indirectly, perhaps through the improvement of the patient’s mood.

Mesmer’s publication was controversial – pamphlets began to appear praising it,

whilst others were critical. The medical profession were quick to denounce animal magnetism. The physician to the Duke of Orleans, Jacque de Horne, launched in an article, a scathing personal attack on Mesmer, who he described as “shrewd and cunning”, a “mountebank operating on credulous victims”. No doubt such litigious comments today would be met with a lawyer’s letter and a subsequent court appearance.

d’Eslon’s own contribution to the cause was his ‘Observations sur le Magnetisme Animal’, which in stark contrast to Mesmer’s memoirs was refined, elegant and modest. Worthy of mention is that d’Eslon, in his Observations, is somewhat sceptical of Mesmer’s “universal fluid” and, instead, wrote of a “physical influence” between physician and patient that when blocked would result in disease. He viewed the role of the therapist to clear this impedance and crises to be pivotal in this area. He warned that, whilst crises were unpleasant, unless a patient persisted through the discomfort, a cure would not be realised. Unlike Mesmer, his aim was not to achieve acceptance of the theory but an attempt to convince readers of the efficacy of *magnetisme animal*.

d’Eslon’s medical training and his aristocratic status gave weight to his writing. In September 1780, the Faculty of Medicine called an assembly at which d’Eslon was severely castigated – he stood accused of shielding a German quack. His calm plea for an investigation was rejected. The Faculty threatened d’Eslon with expulsion unless he rejected Mesmer’s propositions and disavowed his own ‘Observations sur le Magnetisme Animal’.

d’Eslon had no intention of doing either and used his position at court to influence a royal investigation into animal magnetism. A commission was almost in place when the project was suddenly abandoned. Mesmer, ever suspicious of a plot, decided his enemies were once again conspiring against him and was determined to seek recognition abroad.

Au Revoir Paris

Mesmer’s imminent departure worried his patients and followers immensely. Amongst the anxious patients were several aristocrats, notably, the Princess de Lamballe and the Duchess de Chaulnes. They pleaded with Queen Marie Antoinette who interceded, deputising the Minister of State, the Comte de Maurepas to act in her name.

Maurepas decided that a commission should investigate Mesmer and animal magnetism. If the report was favourable, Mesmer would have an annuity of 20,000 livres and a chateau in which he would establish a training clinic, on the undertaking that he did not leave France without the King’s permission. Mesmer was unhappy with the prospect of a commission. Given his previous experiences, he did not think a commission would be either competent or impartial.

Maurepas, doing his best to help, brought this to King Louis XVI’s notice and returned to Mesmer with what he thought were greatly improved conditions – Mesmer could move into the chateau and claim the 20,000 livres immediately. All that was asked of Mesmer was that he adopt three pupils, to be nominated by Maurepas in due course.

Mesmer was convinced the three pupils were spies, members of the faculty secretly investigating his work, insisting to Maurepas that he alone must be allowed to choose the pupils. His ungrateful reply was left unanswered, dealing Mesmer’s battle for recognition a heavy blow.

In 1781, Mesmer decided to leave Paris for a health resort in Spa – according to d’Eslon he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and was applying his therapy to himself.

In Mesmer’s absence, d’Eslon set up an establishment for Mesmeric treatment. Mesmer returned to Paris immediately, severely berating d’Eslon, accusing him of “infidelity and ignorance”. d’Eslon maintained that this was his own effort to carry on the good work of his mentor.

In order to safeguard his work, The Society of Harmony was founded in 1784 by Mesmer with the help of two shrewd friends.

The conditions of joining such a society were simple. Not only did prospective members have to pay a fee of 100 louis, they were also required to sign a contract stating that one would not teach or practise animal magnetism without Mesmer's explicit consent. Mesmer was trying to safeguard his valuable discovery, restricting its dissemination, and in effect was forcing his pupils to undertake a vow of silence. This was much to the unhappiness of his pupils, who felt that Mesmer was withholding a "secret", when they realised that they could not achieve the same level of success as he did in therapy. Mesmer did not do much to dispel this myth and in fact made allusions to it. Mesmer was financially insecure by nature and perhaps this was a manifestation of that insecurity.

d'Eslon was a loyal member of the society but eventually resigned, disgusted at his mentor's muteness regarding his therapeutic "secret". It was d'Eslon's resignation that would eventually be the swan song for Mesmer's animal magnetism.

d'Eslon was determined to have animal magnetism investigated. Despite being ostracised by the Faculty of Medicine, he used his influence at court to his advantage. In due course, King Louis XVI despatched two commissions, one from the Royal Society of Medicine and the second from the Royal Academy of Sciences and the Faculty of Medicine.

Since Mesmer refused to be investigated, the commissions turned to d'Eslon, since it was he who initiated the enquiry.

After extensive but rather unscientific investigations, the first commission contended that whilst:

"...it is impossible not to admit, from all these results, that some great force acts upon and masters the patients, and that this force appears to reside in the magnetiser..."

they declared that:

"... the imagination without the aid of Magnetism can produce convulsions, and that Magnetism without the imagination can produce nothing. ... that there is no proof of the existence of the Animal Magnetic fluid.. the effects which are observed... are caused by... the excited imagination of the patient and by the involuntary instinct of imitation."

The second commission reached a similar conclusion, deciding the main cause of the crises was from the magnetist stroking the patient's body "which would excite the nerves", adding that the patient's imagination was a secondary cause.

The reports of the Commissions, amongst other factors, coupled with the internal strife which was tearing the Society of Harmony apart, sounded the death knell for animal magnetism. d'Eslon for his pains was expelled from the Faculty of Medicine.

Over the next few years, Mesmer was ridiculed not just by the medical profession but also by a series of satirical plays. It was the latter that dealt the heaviest blow to his credibility. The French government printed over twelve thousand copies of the commissions' reports and disseminated them throughout France and neighbouring countries.

Mesmer eventually left Paris, moving throughout France, Switzerland and Germany, ostensibly in search of a more receptive audience. He finally returned to Vienna in 1793, where he was imprisoned for treason. After his two-month sentence he returned to a village near his hometown, quietly practising animal magnetism for fellow villagers till his death in 1815.

Conclusion

So, was Mesmer really a ‘genius’? Since the term genius refers to one who displays an exceptional natural capacity of intellect or creative talent, the answer, at least one which the author arrives at, is that he probably was not. Undoubtedly, he was a talented healer, healing in an energetic sense rather than as a physician. His methods of healing which involve the laying of hands on the patient, whilst sending “universal fluid” out from his eyes and hands, bears more resemblance to the Japanese healing therapy Reiki than to hypnosis. Reiki involves the patient lying down on a couch, eyes closed, whilst the therapist moves her hands over the patient’s body, all the while sending out healing ‘cosmic energy’. Whilst there may be hypnotic influences at work in both instances, Reiki practitioners would probably be aggrieved if one referred to their work as hypnosis. Mesmer was outraged that all his work had been attributed by the Commission to the patient’s imagination. He dismissed the notion that the mind had anything to do with therapy, insisting that the healing occurred because of him alone.

Was Mesmer actually a pioneer then? Again, the answer appears to be in the negative. The art of hands-on healing has been with us for time immemorial. Jesus of Nazareth cured the sick with his hands, and it is known that some ancient Kings cured their subjects of scrofula by a mere touch.

More recently in the sixteenth century a similar technique practised by “stokers” was found in some tribal communities. This bore similarities to massage, with the exception that there was no physical contact between therapist and patient. The “stroker’s” hands made passes over the corporeal body, drawing out and releasing “noxious substances” stuck in the body. The similarities to Mesmer’s universal fluid are startling. Mesmer believed that a blockage in the flow of the universal fluid would lead to disease. The “stokers” removed noxious substances or blockages as part of their therapy. Like Mes-

mer, they believed that the ensuing trance and convulsions indicated the method was working satisfactorily.

There was nothing novel in what Mesmer was practising. Mesmer merely reinvented the wheel and called it by a different name. He aggressively laid claim to his “discovery”, protecting it with the tenacity of a bulldog. The “discovery” of animal magnetism must not be linked to hypnosis as animal magnetism refers to the manipulation of this cosmic energy whilst hypnosis utilises the imagination. Given his apparent repudiation of the therapeutic effects of the imagination, one wonders if Mesmer would balk at being remembered as the “Father of Hypnosis”.

Was Mesmer then a quack, a charlatan, a deceitful conman? If by charlatan one means a cheat, a flamboyant deceiver, then the answer is no. Mesmer fiercely believed in what he was doing, although rather self-servingly at times. He genuinely believed that what he was doing was for the greater good. These are arguably not the qualities of a charlatan but rather of an egocentric.

Mesmer could be prone to generosity and would always reserve a baquet in his workplace exclusively for the poor. When he first arrived in Paris, despite vowing to avoid therapy, he was unable to turn away sufferers who approached him for help. In his old age, when his neighbours or fellow villagers requested therapy with animal magnetism, he would endeavour to assist them, not charging them for his services.

Mesmer had his failings though. He could be obstinate and tactless, as evidenced by his eventual irreconcilable rift with d’Eslon, a patient and calm man, who did his best to placate and assist Mesmer. His lack of tact and diplomacy alienated most of his friends. He appeared rather ungrateful at times, launching scathing attacks and writing cutting letters to those who had once helped him but whom he now perceived, somewhat inaccurately, to be against him. The soon-to-be deposed Marie Antoinette, who did her best to help Mesmer and his cause, was the unjust recipient of one

such unappreciative letter. He was quick to see a conspiracy when none existed and no one was above suspicion, even d'Eslon, his most loyal and forgiving supporter. Pride was ultimately his stumbling block. Through his Society of Harmony, he endeavoured to spread his influence but, at the same time, attempted to clip the wings of those who did so for him. Those who he could not control, he discredited. His own insecurities, both financial and that of his "discovery", sowed the seeds for his eventual undoing.

It can be argued it was due to Mesmer's failings, that animal magnetism – then later,

through a complex chain of events beyond the scope of this article – also hypnotism, was brought to the people.

After the events of 1784, practitioners began noticing what would later be termed hypnotic phenomena in magnetised people and numerous experiments were carried out in Europe. More than half a century later, the British surgeon James Braid would call the trance state of magnetised patients "Hypnos" after the Greek God of sleep. Whilst Mesmer may not be the "Father of Hypnosis", his name rather erroneously, will be forever associated with it.

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