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Mesmer, Franz Anton

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Without Abstract

Basic Biographical Information

Mesmer (1734–1815) was born in Iznang on the German shore of Lake Constance. Mesmer's secondary education was in Jesuit schools, and his post-secondary education continued at the Jesuit universities in Dilligen and Ingolstadt. Pursuing a theological degree, Mesmer was exposed to rationalism which led him to question Catholicism and away from theology. The years 1755–1759 are unaccounted for in Mesmer's life, and some sources report that he earned a doctorate in philosophy in 1759. That claim was included in the title page of his medical dissertation (see facsimile in Pattie 2004, p. 14). However, Pattie, a reliable Mesmerian scholar, concluded that it was likely "self-conferred" (p. 15).

In 1759, Mesmer began studying law in Vienna, but he soon abandoned law to study medicine. He earned a medical doctorate in Vienna in 1766, and his medical dissertation was *Dissertatio physico-medica de planetarum influx*. The dissertation presented a theoretical argument that gravitation could influence the body and that gravitational tides in the body could be manipulated to treat disease. Pattie argued convincingly that Mesmer plagiarized Richard Mead's *On the Influence of the Sun and Moon upon Human Bodies and the Diseases Arising Therefrom* (Pattie's translation from Latin) although others have said that Mesmer was merely guilty of following the poor rules of citation that prevailed at that time.

Little did it matter whether Mesmer plagiarized Mead, because Mesmer soon shifted his emphasis to animal magnetism. Poor magnetic conditions in the body were believed to be the sole cause of disease, and for many patients such conditions could be manipulated to the patient's benefit. Initially Mesmer used strong magnets to treat his clients, but he soon realized

that the magnets were unnecessary and that he, especially, and any suitably trained physician could manipulate a patient's animal magnetism. Mesmer believed that he could charge substances, including water, with magnetism and that he could treat several patients concurrently by having them hold metal rods placed in containers of magnetized water; his famous *baquet* was a variation on this kind of group therapy device.

It is unclear what Mesmer thought the material basis for animal magnetism might be, but he sincerely believed that it had one. While Mesmer's notion of animal magnetism seems farfetched today, it must be recalled that this was an era when legitimate scientists believed electricity to be a "subtle fluid," neural conduction was attributed to the flow of "animal spirits" (there was experimentation to determine whether animal spirits were gaseous or liquid), and that life resulted from a supernatural "vital spirit."

Mesmer had some early successes and failures, and he soon learned to sort his patients into those who might benefit from his treatment and those who might not, and he referred the latter to other physicians. He enjoyed several years of success in Paris, until King Louis XVI appointed a commission to test the validity of animal magnetism. A distinguished committee headed by Benjamin Franklin, the American statesman and member of the Royal Academy of Sciences for his expertise in electricity, conducted several sophisticated control tests. They concluded that animal magnetism did not exist and that any so-called beneficial effects were due to the patient's "imagination." The 1784 report has only recently been translated from French to English (Franklin et al. 1996 [1784]).

Depending upon whom you read, Mesmer was either a charlatan (e.g., Zilboorg 1941) or a genius ahead of his time (e.g., Alexander and Selesnick 1966). Confirming the former is that Mesmer could be petty, greedy, vindictive, secretive, and, for example, he refused to submit his ideas about animal magnetism to control tests. Supporting the latter was that he was a conscientious scientist in his beliefs and a sincere and compassionate medical man who treated the poor for free.

Eventually, much medical, psychiatric, and psychological good would come from "mesmerism," a name suggested by Karl Wolfhart who was a friend and the editor for Mesmer's final published work. Later, to improve the legitimacy of "mesmerism" for medical use (anesthesia), James Braid gave it a new name (neurypnology) that soon evolved to "hypnosis" and he gave it a physiological explanation. However, Pattie (2004) whose concluding chapter is titled "Genius or Charlatan," gave Mesmer little or no credit for anticipating the psychological uses of hypnosis which is where mesmerism's ultimate redemption occurred.

Major Accomplishments/Contributions

Many of Mesmer's medical and scientific writings are available in English translation (Bloch 1980). As indicated above, it is difficult to know how much to attribute to Mesmer for

mesmerism's (hypnosis) ultimate contributions. After Mesmer's disgrace at the hands of the Royal Commission's report in 1784, serious consideration of mesmerism by the medical establishment was dismissed. Despite strong resistance by his medical colleagues at University College, London, John Elliotson carried the banner for mesmerism as surgical anesthesia and to treat mental illness, and James Esdaile, a Scottish surgeon in India, had great success using mesmerism as anesthesia including a drastic reduction in mortality rates for some medical conditions. Braid's contribution mentioned above was invaluable. The successful use of ether for surgical anesthesia in 1842 by Crawford W. Long of Georgia opened the way for chemical anesthetics to replace mesmerism as anesthesia, but mesmerism continued to be advanced in the treatment of the mentally ill. Psychiatrists such as Hippolyte-Marie Bernheim and Jean-Martin Charcot in France led the way. Today, there are numerous organizations and medical and psychological practitioners devoted to the advancement of medical and psychological hypnosis.

See Also

[Catholics in Psychology](#)

[Hypnosis](#)

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