

by Randy Alley

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Belief in mesmerism required a lot of faith. Unlike phrenology, mesmerism provided no physical evidence. When practicing phrenology the reader could look at the skull and see the protuberances. Observers could see the measurements between the ridges that indicated the alleged organs. People could see the differences among individuals. For mesmerism, or animal magnetism as it was called, followers had to believe there was nothing to see. The only support for animal magnetism's existence was the word of the mesmerist, or as he was often called, somnambulist.

Mesmerism Considered

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Like phrenology, mesmerism was a doctrine with ancient roots. People had always known that comfort and sympathy helped to cure sickness. However, many attributed this assistance to "mysterious power" possessed by music and amulets. These items or actions were often thought to be the power that cured illness. Mesmerism used all of these props and one new one. By the 18th century scientists had begun to experiment with electricity and magnets in an attempt to discover new cures. One such experimenter was a Catholic priest named Father Hell. Hell claimed to have cured himself of various ailments, including arthritis, by using magnets.¹ His subsequent discussions with a young medical doctor, Franz Anton Mesmer, led Mesmer to develop a new theory which he called animal magnetism.

Animal magnetism dictated that there existed in the human body a fluid just beneath the skin. This fluid, although invisible, was controlled by gravity and the influence of the planets. Sickness and injury were the result of disruptions in this fluid. However, the possibility of relief existed, for the fluid was magnetic and therefore could be controlled by magnets or electricity. When the flow of the fluid was restored, health returned.

The mesmerist had the skill and knowledge to restore the flow of this fluid. Methods of restoring this fluid were as many as the practitioners of mesmerism. Some used magnets to ply their trade. At least one used trees. Mesmer himself used a device called a baquet. However, many used only the power of their minds.

Patients undergoing mesmeric treatment were called somnambules. Mesmerists, utilizing their mental ability, would attempt to exercise levels of control, called clairvoyance, over the patient. They claimed that establishing the highest levels of clairvoyance would give them an intuitive foresight into the patient's needs. This ability enabled them to

diagnose illness and disease without the aid of medical knowledge or a physical examination. However, other mesmerists continued to use Mesmer's more traditional method of animal magnetism.

Beginning in 1766, Mesmer published a series of discourses starting with the *Physical-Medical Treatise on the Influence of the Planets*. This paper outlined the physical influences that orbiting planets had on all objects on earth, including human beings. The effect of the planets on people was similar to their effect on the oceans. Specifically, the rotation of the planets would cause the fluids within the body to ebb and flow. This ebb and flow would cause imbalances to the fluids, which were the cause of sickness. When the gravitational force upon the earth was extremely strong, plagues would run rampant. When the force was weak, people would enjoy good health. Therefore, good health would return when the forces of gravity were right to balance the body's fluids. Mesmer called this force animal gravity.

Mesmer improved upon his theory in *Discourse by Mesmer on Magnetism*. The premise was that a thin fluid coursed throughout the body just under the skin. This fluid was controlled by external gravitational or magnetic forces, which were produced by all objects. Sickness was caused by imbalances in this fluid, but it could be controlled with magnets. A physician using magnetized rods could restore the fluid and return health to the patient.

Based on the evidence, these two papers received little credit and great ridicule. Mesmer decided to take a different approach with his next endeavor. In 1779, Mesmer published his landmark paper *Dissertation on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism*. However, he chose not to disclose the theory of animal magnetism. Instead, he stated that his theories were misunderstood by the public. Prejudices against him had subverted the truth. The purpose of this dissertation was only to set the record straight.

It is with the object of giving a satisfactory reply and in order to provide a general idea of the system I propose, to free it from the errors with which it has been surrounded and to make known the difficulties which have formed an obstacle to its being known, that I am publishing this Dissertation which is merely the forerunner of a theory I shall impart as soon as circumstances enable me to indicate the practical rules of the method I am announcing . . . Experience alone will scatter the clouds and shed light on this important truth: that NATURE AFFORDS A UNIVERSAL MEANS OF HEALING AND PRESERVING MEN.²

To Mesmer, society was not yet worthy of his theory because people did not believe in it or in him. He set out to convince society of the facts of animal magnetism with this paper outlining how he tested his theory. His idea behind the theory of animal magnetism was:

. . . all bodies were, like the magnet, capable of communicating this magnetic principle; that this fluid penetrated everything; that it could be stored up and concentrated, like the electric fluid; that it acted at a distance; that animate bodies were divided into two classes, one being susceptible to this magnetism and the other to an opposite quality that suppresses its action.³

Using this information, Mesmer claimed that he cured several patients of serious illness by restoring their magnetic fields. To do so, he had applied magnetized pieces to the patient's afflicted area. He also told how he was betrayed by Mr. Ingenhousze, a Member of the Royal Academy of London and Inoculator at Vienna. Ingenhousze allegedly observed Mesmer cure a patient. While Mesmer was present, Ingenhousze appeared to be fascinated by the truth of animal magnetism. However, after he left Mesmer, he informed the members of the Royal Academy and the public that Mesmer was a premeditated fraud. These actions infuriated Mesmer. He believed that they served as proof of the scientific community's plot to discredit him.

Mesmer continued his experiments and set up clinics in Paris. For a fee, Mesmer would impart his secret to worthy individuals who promised not to divulge it. Many of his students went off on their own and practiced their own version of animal magnetism with differing results. Mesmer, joined by his star pupil, Charles d'Eslon, set up a clinic in Paris to treat multiple patients using a device called a baquet. This was a large oak tub, approximately five feet in diameter and about one foot deep. It was filled with magnetized bottles, ground glass, and iron fillings which were covered with water. The entire tub was covered with a wood cap through which jointed iron rods were placed. Patients would sit around the baquet in a circle attached to each other by a cord. Mesmer or one of his assistants would then place the iron rods against the diseased parts of the patient's body.

Mesmer's patients included some of the wealthiest members of Paris society, and for them he would put on an extravagant show. He would enter the room dressed in long lavender robes, oftentimes playing a harmonica. After the start of the treatment, Mesmer would personally treat very excited patients, usually young females, in private rooms called Salle des Crises. In this "special" room he would provide personal attention to sooth their worries and allay their fears. When questioned about the less than virtuous nature of these special treatments, d'Eslon admitted that "a woman in a high state of magnetic excitement, was not mistress of her own actions, and was incapable of resisting any attempts on her modesty."⁴

These activities did not go unnoticed. By 1778, the Royal Academy of Sciences had taken an interest in examining animal magnetism. Mesmer, after failing to convince the Academy of the value of animal magnetism, suggested scientific testing be performed. This testing, according to Mesmer, would prove his theory. Mesmer requested a joint study of 24 patients. Twelve of these patients were to be treated by Mesmer and 12 by an ordinary physician. However, the experiment never got started. The organizational meeting to set up the experiment ended in a shouting match, which included members of the Academy calling Mesmer a quack and accusing d'Eslon of unworthy conduct. The charges against d'Eslon were confirmed and he was censured and eventually had his physicians license revoked.

In 1781, Baron Le Tonnelier Breuil, who served as Minister of the Department of Paris, approached Mesmer on behalf the French Government. Breuil offered Mesmer a cash payment of 300,000 livres, a yearly pension of 20,000 livres and an additional 10,000 livres annually for a facility. The only requirement was that he would instruct three pupils, nominated by the Government, in the tenets and practices of animal magnetism. Mesmer indignantly refused this offer. Insulted, Mesmer screamed that the secrets of animal magnetism were worth at least 500,000 livres a year. Mesmer then withdrew from French society and started the secret Society of Universal Harmony, whose members agreed not to reveal the secrets of animal magnetism.

In 1784, King Louis XVI ordered the Academie Royale des Sciences to investigate the mesmerizing practices of Charles d'Eslon. Two commissions were appointed. The first was chaired by Benjamin Franklin and eight other Royal Academy members, including Antoine Lavoiser and Joseph de Guillotin. This commission conducted scientific studies to determine the existence and the effects of animal magnetism. After the conclusion of this scientific testing, the commission issued its report "Rapport des Comissaires charges par le Roy de l'examen du Magnetisme animal" (Report of the Royal Commission on Animal Magnetism), which stated that no physical evidence was available to support the existence of Mesmer's fluid. Mesmer's cures were not really cures at all. Rather, the commission concluded those who were cured probably would have gotten well on their own. "Magnetism," according the Report of the Commission, "without the imagination can produce nothing." Five days later, the report by the second commission confirmed these results. However, this report was not published.⁵ Mesmerism began to fade from public view.

By 1825 animal magnetism reared its head again. At the request of Dr. P. Foissac, the Royal Academy of Medicine again examined the claims of the mesmerists. As the result of a preliminary study, another commission was formed to reexamine the claims. This commission had 11 members, including Francois Double and Francois Magendie, both of whom resigned because the commission would not use scientific testing. This commission, after examining 14 patients over a five-year period, determined that some sick patients disclosed minor results. However, it was noted that these results might have been normal reactions. In healthy patients no results were noticed. Finally, two of the patients were found to be "trained subjects." The academy concluded that the commission failed to conduct scientific studies of mesmerised patients and refused to issue the report.⁶

The fiasco surrounding this report ended professional scrutiny of mesmerism. However, from time to time throughout the 19th century the "secret" of animal magnetism would be pronounced as discovered. Scientific tests would quickly refute these new discoveries. The end result was that most practicing mesmerists were reduced to traveling sideshows.

Many people continued to conduct experiments to prove that animal magnetism existed. These experiments generally consisted of a blindfolded somnambulist being asked to diagnose an unseen patient or to tell where in the room the patient was standing. A few tests did initially appear successful. Unfortunately, as was the case with the second commission, the results were later found to be the result of fraud. The vast majority simply resulted in failure when the somnambulist could not provide the appropriate answer.

Although it did have several brief reincarnations, the disillusionment with animal magnetism came much faster than with phrenology. The Royal Commissions had contained the cream of France's scientific community. Because of their reports, knowledgeable people never saw mesmerism as more than a source for humorous stories. John Millingen asked, "should we reject them as the impostures of knaves, or the result of the credulity of fools?"⁷ The overwhelming opinion of mesmerism, in spite of the attempts to resurrect it, was that it was deserving of scorn. Those who practiced it were con-men and charlatans while those who believed it were fools and knaves.

References

These claims still persist today. Professional golfer Jim Colbert attributes his relief from chronic back pain to his wearing of "silver dollar sized magnets on a belt and bracelets." Of course, he ignores his new workout schedule with his personal trainer. See: USA Today, 7 May 1998, p. 10C.)

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