

by Randy Alley

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Dr. Kreider Speaks Out

Part 3: On Mesmerism

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Kreider described mesmerism, using the definition provided by mesmerists, as "a peculiar influence, or general effect, which one person is able to produce on the system of another."¹ He divided mesmerists into three distinct groups: manipulations, spiritualists, and the physical and conjoined mental. There also existed several subgroups, such as the phreno-magnetists who combined beliefs of phrenology and mesmerism.

The mesmerist could exert his influence over the physical, mental, and moral powers of the somnambule. Mesmerism also taught that this influence was unconfined, and enabled the mesmerist to raise the mind of the patient "to the most exalted condition, and... position."² When the mesmeriser brought the patient to the third degree of clairvoyance, called somnambulism, the patient suddenly gained the power to diagnose illness and disease and prescribe remedies:

The third degree of clairvoyance is that which the sleep-waker, though wholly ignorant of physiology, anatomy, and medicine, perceives precisely the character of diseases, either in his own body, or in the bodies of others, and prescribes the most effective remedies.³

This ability gave mesmerised patients a fantastic skill. With no medical knowledge they could now diagnose and prescribe for themselves and for others. Society would no longer need physicians.

However, this was too much even for those people who believed in mesmerism. Joseph Francois Deleuze (1735-1835), a French naturalist who supported Mesmer and suggested that the Royal Academy study his principles, readily pointed out that caution should be advised when acting upon the mesmeric remedy. Deleuze believed that mesmeric remedies, while treating one symptom of an ailment, would overlook the underlying cause. Kreider described the care that Deleuze recommended be taken in the use of drugs prescribed by a somnambulist:

The somnambulist, occupied with the organ which is most afflicted, prescribes remedies for that without examining whether they are not otherwise injurious. He mentions the case of a lady, suffering from diseased stomach and lungs, who prescribes for herself medicine for the former, which would have aggravated the latter. The magnetizer made some observations to her about it, in consequence of which she deferred taking it until her lungs were in a better condition; and the result was, that a cure was effected.⁴

Deleuze gave lengthy directions for following the somnambulist's advice. These directions included objecting to the remedy and then making the somnambulist explain why you should take it and what effects you will suffer from it. Then having the somnambulist describe, taste and measure by both weight and volume the amount of the drug described. Only then could a person rely upon the diagnosis. For Kreider, this procedure was ludicrous. How could you trust someone if you had to take all of these steps to confirm his or her treatment?

Casimir Chardel provided Kreider's next tale in the comedy of errors. Chardel mentioned this very unusual case of somnambulism in his book, *Esquisse de la nature humaine expliquée par le magnétisme animal*.⁵ Kreider related the story as the Reverend Charles Townshend presented it. Townshend conducted extensive "research" on animal magnetism and published his results in *Facts on Mesmerism*. In this story Chardel mesmerized two sisters who suffered from consumption. These sisters, "using a natural instinct," requested that Chardel leave them in their somnambulist state and only de-mesmerise "them as to enable them to open their eyes, and to be committed to their own self-guidance." The sisters were left in this state approximately three months, during which time "they felt health returning under the mesmeric influence." Except for their mesmeric existence, life passed normally for the sisters and no differences were noted from their ordinary life. However, at the end of the three months, mesmerism had completely cured the sisters. Chardel then took them and their mother, "to a beautiful spot in the country, where he restored them to a knowledge of themselves." The sisters acted with surprise and joy. While in their mesmeric state, winter had passed to spring. Snow had covered the ground; now the flowers were blooming. Before the trance, the sisters believed that they would die young, but they were now healthy and hopeful about their future. Of the entire episode, the most amazing element was that "not a circumstance of the past three months survived in their memory." Kreider did not attempt to explain this folly. He only presented it for the reader's entertainment.⁶

Kreider continued to make light of the mesmerist's ability to diagnose and treat illness. They did not need science or training, only their intuition to cure the sick with astonishing accuracy and speed:

Clairvoyants, not only excel physicians in prescribing for themselves, but are equally superior in their prescriptions for others! Physicians are often so unfortunate as to mistake the nature of a disease. The Clairvoyant never falls into such an error, because the human body becomes diaphanous to their spiritual vision, again. The physician although his diagnosis is correct, is at a loss for the proper remedy, but the clairvoyant, equally ignorant of all remedies when awake, is perfectly acquainted with all when mesmerised. The physician too must generally visit his patient in order to prescribe with safety and effect, but the clairvoyant, by the going forth of his spirit and with a clarity which puts to the blush the lightning's speed, annihilates distance and at once tells "Saith the disease and what will mend it!"⁷

Dr. Kreider must have surely felt as though he had wasted three years of his life on his medical studies, for the somnambulist could cure and yet be utterly ignorant of medicine and science.

Take the case of Andrew Jackson Davis. A famed spiritualist and self-proclaimed clairvoyant healer, Davis allegedly discovered his ability during a mesmeric trance. For a time, he earned a living by performing as a psychic healer, although he claimed no knowledge of medicine. Davis's entourage claimed that in the mesmeric state, Davis underwent a transformation:

He appears as if metamorphosed into a totally different being. The human system seemed entirely transparent to him; and to our utter astonishment (say they) he employed the technical terms of anatomy, physiology, and *Materia Medica*, as familiarly as household words! Our surprise was equally excited by the exceeding clearness with which he described and reasoned upon the nature, origin, and progress of a disease, and concerning the appropriate means to employ for its removal.⁸

Davis obtained this astounding ability, although he claimed to have never read a book, except the novel *The Three Spaniards*. Unfortunately for Davis, the Reverend A. Bartlett blew the whistle on his subterfuge. Bartlett declared that while he was associated with Davis, Davis was an avid reader who borrowed as many books as he could. Davis claimed that he borrowed the books on the behalf of friends. Kreider's response to this foolishness was to ask how mankind could remain so ignorant as to question the ability of "such super-angelic minds."⁹

Kreider's brief move into seriousness during this discussion was to question why "men of intelligence and especially of the medical profession should have ever embraced such a phantasic, especially after having read the report[s]"¹⁰ of the French Academies. As previously discussed, King Louis XVI ordered the Academie Royale des Sciences to investigate mesmerising practices of Charles d'Eslon in 1784. The Royal Academy appointed two commissions to investigate animal magnetism. The first issued the Report of the Royal Commission on Animal Magnetism, which showed that the claims by the mesmerists on animal magnetism were without merit. The report of the second commission from the Royal Society, although presented, was not published. By 1825, the public had forgotten these reports and another commission was formed. The Commission of Royal Academy of Medicine of Paris was formed to reexamine the claims of the mesmerists. This commission failed to conduct scientific studies of mesmerized patients and the Royal Academy refused to issue the report. For Kreider, these commissions formed the ultimate confirmation that mesmerism was a fraud. The members possessed some of the greatest scientific minds of their age. They had refused to verify that mesmerism was successful. This revelation provides insight to why Kreider presented his case as he did. Any other suggestions were folly.

Kreider finished by repeating the words of John Gideon Millingen (1782-1862) a medical doctor and author of *Curiosities of Medical Experience*. Millingen believed that "somnambulism was too well authenticated to be doubted, although in many cases it may have been a fraudulent trick of animal magnetism."¹¹ Millingen discussed the events during Mesmer's time at Paris in 1780. During this time, the mesmerists were at their peak. Men, animals and plants were all mesmerized. The Marquis Chastenot de Puysegur used a magnetized tree on his estate to mesmerize many people simultaneously. The new millennium was upon mankind. Then the end came. The Minister of the Department of Paris had made his offer to Mesmer and the enraged Mesmer formed the Society of Universal Harmony, whose members agreed not to reveal the secrets of animal magnetism. Mesmerism then traveled down the road to decadence:

The charms and the power of youth and music were not neglected as auxiliaries to propagate the fashionable doctrine. Young men of elegant manners and athletic form were initiated in the practice of magnetizing, and the salons of Paris consecrated to this worship (for such it might have been termed) were crowded with the most fascinating women that the gay metropolis of France could produce. Most of these females, impassioned by nervous excitability, as loose in their morals as to outward appearance as they were fervent in their devotions, abandoned themselves without reserve to the delightful sensations that magnetism and its surrounding machinery were said to afford. In their ecstasies, their hysteric attacks, their spasms, Mesmer, the high-priest, fancifully dressed, but in the height of fashion, with his youthful acolytes, endeavored to sooth and calm the agitation of their enchanting patients by all means that mesmerism could devise.¹²

The new followers of Mesmer claimed to be more skeptical than the members of the Royal Commission. One claimed that "those who were initiated in the secrets of Mesmer entertained more doubts on the subject than who were in thorough ignorance."¹³ Mesmer was still praised in some circles, but the end was near.

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

Michael Z. Kreider, Kreider Manuscript of Phrenology and Mesmerism, Randall Alley, ed., Folder 28-B, Michael Z. Kreider Papers, Pearson Med., Springfield, IL, p. 15-16.

Ibid., p. 16.

Ibid., p. 16.

Ibid., pp. 17-18.

Title shortened.

Ibid., pp. 18-19.

Ibid., p. 19.

Ibid., p. 19-20.

Ibid., p. 20.

Ibid.

J. G. Millingen, *Curiosities of Medical Experience* (London: Richard Bentley, 1839), p. 86.

Ibid., p. 392.

Ibid., p. 392.