

# Franz Freiderich Anton Mesmer

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September 28, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Franz Freiderich Anton Mesmer*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.  
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=29873>

## Franz Freiderich Anton Mesmer

**Born:** 1734 | **Died:** 1815

**Nationality:** German

**Primary Field(s):** Medicine, Psychotherapy (as a precursor), Pseudoscience

### 1. Summary

Franz Freiderich Anton Mesmer, a German physician born in 1734, is prominently remembered as the progenitor of "Mesmerism," a significant historical forerunner to modern hypnotism. His theories were rooted in a unique belief system, which, stemming from an early interest in astronomy, posited the existence of a fundamental energetic transference connecting all living and inanimate entities. Mesmer termed this pervasive, invisible force "animal magnetism." He believed that imbalances or obstructions in the flow of this magnetic fluid within the human body were the root cause of disease, and his therapeutic interventions aimed to restore its harmonious circulation.

Mesmer's career saw him rise to considerable fame, first in Vienna and then dramatically in Paris, where his public demonstrations and clinics attracted a vast following, including members of the aristocracy. Despite the sensational popularity and reported cures among his patients, his concepts faced intense scrutiny and skepticism from the established scientific and medical communities of his era. This culminated in official commissions in Paris that ultimately discredited the physical existence of "animal magnetism."

Nevertheless, the phenomena observed during Mesmer's treatments--such as trance states, heightened suggestibility, and altered consciousness--persisted and continued to intrigue researchers long after his specific theory of animal magnetism had been debunked. These observed effects laid crucial, albeit controversial, groundwork for subsequent investigations into mind-body connections and the power of suggestion. By the close of the 19th century, the principles underlying Mesmerism were divested of their mystical and magnetic fluid connotations, leading to their refinement and reinterpretation as the legitimate art and science of hypnotism, thereby solidifying Mesmer's indirect yet undeniable legacy in the history of psychology and psychotherapy.

### 2. Early Life and Education

Franz Anton Mesmer was born on May 23, 1734, in Iznang, a small village on the shores of Lake Constance in Swabia, then part of the Holy Roman Empire (modern-day Germany). He was one of nine children born to Anton Mesmer, a master forester and chaplain, and Maria Ursula Michel. His early education commenced at the Jesuit University of Dillingen, where he initially pursued studies in theology, a common path for young men of his era seeking intellectual engagement and social mobility. This period instilled in him a foundational understanding of scholastic thought and

perhaps a predisposition towards systematic, if unconventional, explanations of natural phenomena.

Subsequently, Mesmer shifted his academic focus, first to law at the University of Ingolstadt, before ultimately enrolling in the medical faculty at the prestigious University of Vienna in 1759. Vienna was then a vibrant center of Enlightenment thought and scientific inquiry, offering a rich environment for his burgeoning intellectual curiosity. It was here that he completed his medical degree in 1766, defending his doctoral dissertation titled "De planetarum influxu" (On the Influence of the Planets).

This thesis, far from a typical medical treatise, explored the influence of celestial bodies on the human body and disease, drawing parallels between gravitational forces and an assumed universal fluid that permeated all things. While not directly articulating "animal magnetism," this early work clearly foreshadowed his later, more developed theories regarding invisible forces and their therapeutic manipulation. It demonstrated his profound interest in cosmic connections and energetic transfers, establishing an intellectual framework that would guide his most significant contributions and controversies.

### 3. Key Contributions

Mesmer's primary and most enduring contribution was the formulation and popularization of the concept of "animal magnetism," which subsequently lent its name to the therapeutic practice known as "Mesmerism." He theorized that an invisible, pervasive natural fluid or force existed throughout the universe, connecting all animate and inanimate objects. This fluid, he believed, was not static but flowed and transferred between beings, and its proper circulation within the human body was essential for health. Illness, in Mesmer's view, resulted from an obstruction or imbalance of this vital magnetic fluid, which he believed was susceptible to external influence.

From this theoretical basis, Mesmer developed his therapeutic method, Mesmerism. This involved a series of techniques aimed at manipulating and restoring the harmonious flow of animal magnetism in his patients. His methods often included gentle touch, passes of his hands over the patient's body (without physical contact), and the use of magnetized objects. In his Parisian clinics, he famously employed a communal device called a "baquet," a large tub filled with magnetized water and iron filings, from which patients would draw magnetic fluid via iron rods. These sessions often induced various physiological and psychological reactions, including convulsions, emotional outbursts, and trance-like states, which Mesmer interpreted as "crises" necessary for the magnetic fluid's redistribution and subsequent healing.

Despite the eventual scientific discrediting of "animal magnetism" as a physical phenomenon, Mesmer's work holds significant historical importance as a direct precursor to modern hypnotism. Although Mesmer himself attributed the effects to a physical fluid, the dramatic results he achieved,

particularly the induction of trance and heightened suggestibility, were later reinterpreted by subsequent researchers, such as the Scottish surgeon James Braid, as psychological phenomena. Mesmer's practices inadvertently highlighted the profound influence of the mind, expectation, and suggestion on physical well-being, paving the way for the scientific exploration of these psychological processes and the eventual development of psychotherapeutic techniques centered on altered states of consciousness.

#### 4. Career in Vienna and Paris

Mesmer began his medical practice in Vienna in 1768, where he initially gained a degree of notoriety and success. His early clientele included members of the Viennese elite, and he conducted treatments that blended traditional medicine with his emerging theories of animal magnetism. His reputation grew with anecdotal successes, yet he soon encountered resistance from the conservative medical establishment. A notable case involved a blind patient, Maria Theresia Paradies, whose apparent improvement under Mesmer's care sparked controversy and led to accusations of charlatanry, forcing him to leave Vienna in 1778.

Seeking a more receptive audience, Mesmer relocated to Paris, the intellectual and cultural capital of Europe, in 1778. Here, his fame exploded. He established clinics that became fashionable attractions, drawing large crowds of curious onlookers and desperate patients, many from the highest echelons of French society. His dramatic public demonstrations, often involving groups of patients gathered around his baquet, captivated the public imagination. The theatricality of his sessions, combined with a genuine desire for novel medical solutions, contributed to his immense popularity and the rapid spread of Mesmerism throughout France.

The phenomenal success of Mesmerism in Paris, however, also intensified the scrutiny from the academic and medical communities. Many prominent physicians and scientists regarded his theories as unfounded and his practices as manipulative. This growing skepticism eventually prompted the French government, under King Louis XVI, to appoint two royal commissions in 1784 to investigate Mesmer's claims. These investigations would prove pivotal in shaping his legacy and the scientific understanding of his methods.

#### 5. Intellectual Context and Impact

Franz Mesmer's theories emerged during the Age of Enlightenment, a period characterized by a fervent belief in reason, scientific inquiry, and the potential for human progress. However, it was also a time when the boundaries between nascent scientific fields, philosophy, and even mysticism were often blurred. Mesmer's concept of animal magnetism resonated with the era's fascination with invisible forces, such as gravity and electricity, and the search for universal principles governing the natural world. His ideas offered a seemingly scientific explanation for phenomena

that defied conventional medical understanding, appealing to a public eager for effective remedies and intrigued by the promise of hidden cosmic energies.

The immediate impact of Mesmerism was profound, particularly in France. It sparked a widespread cultural phenomenon, influencing literature, art, and social discourse. His clinics became centers of social activity, and the concept of "magnetic healing" permeated various aspects of society. This popularity, however, also led to criticisms regarding the theatricality of his methods and the perceived lack of scientific rigor. Mesmer's emphasis on a universal fluid also fit within a broader tradition of vitalism, a philosophical school of thought positing that living organisms possess a non-physical element or energy that distinguishes them from inanimate matter.

Despite the eventual debunking of animal magnetism as a physical force, Mesmer's legacy is paradoxically significant for the development of modern psychology and psychotherapy. The royal commissions, while disproving the fluid, inadvertently highlighted the powerful role of suggestion, imagination, and expectation in the therapeutic process. The observable phenomena of trance states and heightened suggestibility, which were central to Mesmeric practice, subsequently became the focus of scientific investigation by figures like Étienne Péclet and the Nancy School in the 19th century. This intellectual shift transformed Mesmerism from a pseudo-scientific physical theory into a psychological phenomenon, laying crucial groundwork for the study of hypnotism and eventually contributing to the broader understanding of psychosomatic medicine and the therapeutic power of the mind.

## 6. Major Works

While Mesmer's fame largely stemmed from his charismatic persona and public demonstrations, he did articulate his theories in several written works, providing a formal basis for his ideas on animal magnetism. His earliest significant publication was his doctoral dissertation, "De planetarum influxu" (On the Influence of the Planets), submitted at the University of Vienna in 1766. This work, though predating his full development of animal magnetism, explored the concept of a universal fluid that connected celestial bodies to living organisms, influencing health and disease. It laid the theoretical groundwork for his later, more radical propositions by establishing a framework for understanding unseen forces and their pervasive impact on life.

His most comprehensive and influential work on his developed theory was "Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal" (A Memoir on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism), published in 1779. In this pivotal treatise, Mesmer formally introduced and elaborated upon his theory of animal magnetism, defining it as a dynamic, invisible fluid that pervades the universe and acts as a medium for mutual influence between celestial bodies, the Earth, and living beings. The \*Mémoire\* detailed his principles of operation, described his methods of magnetic healing, and presented case studies to support his claims, serving as the definitive statement of his revolutionary, albeit

controversial, medical philosophy for the scientific community and the general public.

## 7. Criticisms and Debates

The immense popularity and sensational claims surrounding Mesmer's animal magnetism inevitably drew the attention and skepticism of the scientific establishment. In 1784, the French King Louis XVI appointed two royal commissions to investigate Mesmer's claims. These commissions comprised some of the most eminent scientists and physicians of the era, including the chemist [Antoine Lavoisier](#), the astronomer [Jean-Sylvain Bailly](#), and the American statesman and scientist [Benjamin Franklin](#). Their objective was to ascertain whether a physical fluid, as described by Mesmer, truly existed and was responsible for the reported cures.

The commissions conducted rigorous, controlled experiments, notably a series of blind trials. Patients were subjected to magnetic treatments both with and without Mesmer's direct involvement, and also to sham treatments where they believed they were being magnetized but were not. The results were conclusive: the commissions found no evidence whatsoever for the existence of a physical magnetic fluid. They determined that any effects observed during Mesmeric sessions could be attributed entirely to the power of imagination, expectation, imitation, or physiological overstimulation, rather than to an external physical force. This landmark scientific inquiry is often cited as one of the earliest systematic investigations into the [placebo effect](#).

The findings of these commissions were devastating for Mesmer's reputation and led to the official discrediting of animal magnetism as a scientific phenomenon. Mesmer himself was largely forced to withdraw from public life, though his followers continued to practice and refine Mesmerism, often shifting their focus from a physical fluid to a more psychological interpretation of the observed phenomena. This crucial historical debate effectively separated the concept of a universal magnetic fluid from the undeniable reality of psychological suggestion and trance states. In doing so, it inadvertently laid the groundwork for the later scientific study of hypnotism, shifting the focus from an external, pseudo-scientific force to internal psychological processes, ultimately contributing to the modern understanding of the mind's influence over the body and the foundations of psychotherapeutic intervention.

## Further Reading

[Franz Mesmer - Wikipedia](#)

[Franz Anton Mesmer - Britannica](#)

[The Rise and Fall of Franz Anton Mesmer - NCBI](#)