

MESMER, FRANZ ANTON (1734-1815)

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October 10, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *MESMER, FRANZ ANTON (1734- 1815)*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=41077>

FRANZ ANTON MESMER (1734-1815)

Born: 1734 | **Died:** 1815

Nationality: Austrian

Primary Field(s): Medicine, Philosophy, Precursor to Hypnotherapy

1. Summary

Franz Anton Mesmer, a highly controversial figure often regarded as the precursor to modern hypnotherapy, was born in Austria. His academic pursuits were broad and comprehensive, encompassing studies in philosophy at a Jesuit university in Bavaria, followed by medicine and theology at the University of Vienna. Early in his medical career, Mesmer became intrigued by the teachings of **Paracelsus** (1493-1541), a Renaissance physician who had discarded the vague humoral theories of Hippocrates. Paracelsus instead favored the view that mental illness was attributable to disturbing experiences and faulty personality development, a conceptual framework that heavily influenced Mesmer's subsequent divergence from conventional medicine.

Mesmer's primary contribution was the development of his theory of "animal magnetism" or **Mesmerism**. His doctoral thesis explored the magnetic effects of the planets on the human body, but he soon became convinced that celestial forces could be attracted and applied using metallic magnets, rather than the mineral medications championed by Paracelsus. This theory positioned the human body as polarized, capable of channeling a universal magnetic fluid, and Mesmer believed that blockages in this fluid caused disease. His methods quickly gained notoriety in Vienna, where he adopted the theatrical mannerisms of a showman and audaciously claimed that his techniques represented the "final perfection" of the art of healing.

However, his controversial practice led to scrutiny by the Faculty of Medicine in Vienna. Upon investigation, this body concluded that Mesmer's reported cures were solely products of **imagination** rather than actual magnetism, leading to his expulsion from the medical profession. Mesmer subsequently moved to Paris, seeking acceptance in a more liberal environment. There, he refined his elaborate group therapy sessions involving the famous **baquet**--a huge tub containing magnetized water and metal rods--and the inducement of a **"grand crisis"** (convulsive seizure), which he asserted was essential for achieving a cure. Although Mesmerism became the talk of Parisian society, it ultimately faced decisive scientific investigation and official condemnation.

2. Key Contributions

Establishment of Animal Magnetism: Mesmer formalized a system of diagnosis and treatment based on the theory that an invisible, fluidic medium pervaded the universe, which he termed

"animal magnetism." Though this theory was scientifically invalidated, it provided the initial terminology and theoretical basis for exploring non-physical influences on health.

Pioneering the Power of Suggestion: Unintentionally, Mesmer's reliance on elaborate rituals, the forceful personality of the practitioner, and the heightened expectation of the patient demonstrated the profound therapeutic effect of **suggestion** and the doctor-patient interpersonal relationship, laying the critical groundwork for the later development of psychological medicine and modern hypnosis.

The "Grand Crisis" Method: Mesmer systematized the method of inducing a convulsive seizure through intensive rapport and concentrated magnetic fluid flow, believing this dramatic physiological response to be curative. This technique, though controversial, formalized an early method for eliciting powerful psychophysiological reactions in a therapeutic setting.

3. Intellectual Context and Influences

Mesmer's concepts were deeply rooted in medical theories post-Hippocrates, drawing heavily on the idea of internal energies and cosmic connections. He was significantly influenced by the methods of Paracelsus and the Flemish chemist Jan Baptista van Helmont (1577-1644). While Paracelsus focused on mineral medications to capture magnetic forces from celestial bodies, van Helmont elaborated by suggesting that magnetic fluids could radiate directly from the human body and be focused upon others through conscious effort. Both thinkers provided the fundamental assumption that the human body was polarized into positive and negative states, and coupling this polarity with the Universal Spirit could harness power to cure illness.

Mesmer's adoption of metallic magnets, rather than Paracelsus's minerals, reflected the burgeoning scientific atmosphere of the time. The 18th century witnessed groundbreaking discoveries in electricity and **magnetism**, prompting many practitioners, some legitimate and many charlatans, to apply this new knowledge to medical problems. This zeitgeist included events such as James Graham opening a "Temple of Health" using electrically magnetized water in England, and physician Elisha Perkins patenting brass and copper "tractors" in the American colonies to draw out pain. Mesmer was thus operating within a period where incorporating modern physical concepts, even superficially, lent credibility to unconventional medical claims.

A pivotal direct influence was the demonstration by Father Maximilian Hell, who claimed to cure emotional illness by applying magnetized plates to a patient's body. After observing this, Mesmer replicated the technique, leading to his first recorded success with a woman suffering from neuralgia and convulsions. Mesmer incorrectly theorized that his success was due to the magnets capturing and funneling magnetic fluids from the atmosphere to revitalize the patient's nervous system. The true underlying mechanism--the therapeutic effect generated by the patient's belief and the interpersonal influence exerted by Mesmer--remained unrecognized by him and his

colleagues.

4. Legacy and Subsequent Impact

Despite the definitive scientific condemnation by the French commissions, Mesmerism persisted among a handful of reputable physicians who wisely abandoned the astrological and fluidic explanations. This post-Mesmer phase was critical for the evolution of hypnotherapy. The Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825), a key figure in this transition, discovered that the technique could induce a quiet, collaborative **somnambulistic state** rather than the violent grand crisis. Patients in this state exhibited unexpected clarity of thought and appeared clairvoyant, leading to the use of mesmerized individuals for diagnostic purposes.

Furthermore, Mesmer's techniques found a powerful, albeit controversial, application in surgery. The British physician John Elliotson (1791-1868) proposed using Mesmerism as an anesthetic. This was put into dramatic practice by surgeon James Esdaile (1808-1859), who reported successfully performing over two hundred major operations on convicts in India using only Mesmerism for anesthesia. Although these reports were often met with deep skepticism and outrage, the clinical successes marked essential steps toward dissociating the hypnotic state from the occult and establishing its potential value for pain management and surgery, thus securing Mesmer's indirect legacy in modern medical practice.

5. Criticisms and Debates

Mesmer's career was defined by continuous conflict with the medical establishment, rooted in the theatrical nature and unverified claims of his practice. After his expulsion from Vienna, the most significant challenge arose in Paris in 1784, when the French government appointed two commissions to investigate Mesmerism, featuring distinguished scientists like Antoine Lavoisier and Benjamin Franklin. Although Mesmer refused to participate, the commissions studied the work of his follower, Charles D'Eslon.

The public report issued by the commission was devastating, unanimously concluding that the magnetic fluid was a **hoax**. The commission formally attributed all observed cures to the potent influence of one person's will over another through the vehicle of **imagination**. This outcome solidified the scientific consensus that Mesmerism's effects were psychological, not physical.

In addition to the scientific condemnation, the commissions submitted a secret report to King Louis XVI, expressing profound moral and social anxieties. They issued grave warnings that the induced "grand crisis" could potentially become habitual, hereditary, and even assume epidemic proportions. Furthermore, they pointed out that women were particularly susceptible to the crisis state, raising serious concerns about the risk of **seducibility** and moral transgression while patients were in such a helpless, vulnerable condition. Consequently, Mesmerism was officially

labeled as both medically unsound and morally dangerous, contributing significantly to Mesmer's personal decline and eventual retirement.

Further Reading

[Franz Mesmer \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Animal Magnetism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Franz Anton Mesmer \(Britannica\)](#)

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