

# Mesmerism

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## Mesmerism

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Medicine, Early Psychology, Parapsychology, Alternative Medicine

### 1. Core Definition

Mesmerism, also widely recognized as animal magnetism, constitutes a complex concept developed in the late 18th century, positing the existence of a pervasive, invisible natural energy or fluid. This energy was theorized to circulate dynamically between all living organisms and inanimate objects, serving as a fundamental medium through which health, disease, and various physical and mental states were regulated. According to its originator, Franz Anton Mesmer, an imbalance or obstruction in the flow of this "magnetic fluid" within the human body was the root cause of illness, and its proper re-establishment was key to healing. The concept suggested a universal interconnectedness, implying that a skilled practitioner could harness and direct this subtle force for therapeutic purposes, influencing the physiological and psychological equilibrium of patients.

Initially, the term **Mesmerism** primarily referred to the theoretical construct of **animal magnetism** itself--an overarching cosmic energy believed to be susceptible to human manipulation. This original interpretation focused on the physical principles underlying the supposed fluid and its interaction with the human body, positioning it as a quasi-scientific explanation for phenomena that defied conventional medical understanding of the era. The therapeutic practices were thus framed as interventions designed to restore the natural balance of this magnetic fluid, often through physical passes, touch, or the use of magnetized objects, leading to various physiological responses in patients, from convulsions to states of calm.

Over time, however, the understanding and application of Mesmerism underwent a significant evolution, leading to a notable shift in its primary connotation. While the underlying theory of animal magnetism remained central, public and professional discourse increasingly focused on the profound psychological states induced by Mesmer's methods. These states, characterized by deep relaxation, altered consciousness, and heightened suggestibility, were observed as direct outcomes of the "magnetic" treatments. Consequently, the term **Mesmerism** began to be more commonly associated with these trance-like or hypnotic states, rather than solely with the abstract energy concept. This semantic transition paved the way for later developments in the study of suggestion and what would eventually be formalized as hypnosis, marking a crucial pivot from a purely physical fluid theory to a recognition of psychological influence.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of Mesmerism was meticulously developed and subsequently popularized by the German physician Franz Friedrich Anton Mesmer (1734-1815). Born in Iznang, Swabia, Mesmer

initially studied theology and law before pursuing medicine, culminating in his doctoral thesis in 1766 from the University of Vienna, which explored the influence of planetary movements on human health. This early intellectual pursuit already hinted at his later fascination with invisible forces and their effects on biological systems, laying the conceptual groundwork for his theory of animal magnetism. Mesmer's early clinical practice involved the use of magnets, which he believed could manipulate the hypothesized universal fluid within patients, thereby alleviating various ailments. This innovative, albeit controversial, approach quickly distinguished him from his contemporaries and marked the nascent stages of Mesmerism.

Mesmer's theories gained substantial traction and widespread notoriety, particularly after he relocated to Paris in the 1770s. In the vibrant intellectual and social climate of pre-Revolutionary France, his ideas resonated with a public eager for novel scientific and medical explanations, especially those that promised cures for conditions unresponsive to conventional treatments. His Parisian clinics became fashionable institutions, attracting a large and diverse following among the elite, including aristocrats, intellectuals, and artists. Patients would gather in elaborate treatment rooms, often around a shared apparatus known as the baquet, where Mesmer or his assistants would perform magnetic "passes." The dramatic and often theatrical nature of these sessions, combined with the palpable sensations experienced by patients, contributed significantly to Mesmerism's rapid rise in popularity, transforming it from a medical theory into a widespread social phenomenon.

Despite its initial widespread popularity and the fervent belief of its adherents, Mesmerism faced intense scrutiny and skepticism from the established scientific and medical communities of the era. Mainstream physicians and scientists were wary of Mesmer's unconventional claims, which lacked empirical verification according to the prevailing scientific standards. The lack of a tangible, measurable "magnetic fluid" and the often dramatic, yet inconsistent, results of the treatments fueled growing doubts about its scientific validity. This skepticism culminated in official investigations by royal commissions appointed by King Louis XVI in 1784, which included prominent figures like Benjamin Franklin and Antoine Lavoisier. Their findings largely debunked Mesmer's claims regarding animal magnetism, severely damaging his reputation and forcing him to leave Paris, marking a significant turning point in the historical trajectory of Mesmerism from a celebrated cure to a subject of scientific discredit.

### 3. Theoretical Underpinnings and Methodology

Central to Mesmer's original and elaborate theory was the notion of a universal fluid that permeates all of creation, acting as an intermediary between the planets, the earth, and all living bodies. This imponderable, subtle fluid, which he termed **animal magnetism**, was believed to ebb and flow throughout the universe, influencing the nervous systems of humans and animals. Mesmer postulated that this fluid was naturally aligned in healthy individuals, allowing for

harmonious physiological function. However, he contended that various environmental factors, emotional disturbances, or physical ailments could disrupt this delicate balance, leading to blockages or misalignments in the fluid's flow. It was this disruption, according to Mesmer, that manifested as disease, ranging from nervous disorders and chronic pain to more severe somatic complaints. His theory thus presented a holistic view of health, where the individual's well-being was inextricably linked to cosmic forces and internal energetic equilibrium.

Mesmer's therapeutic approach was meticulously designed to rebalance or redirect this vital magnetic fluid within the patient, aiming to restore the body's natural energetic harmony. His methods were often intricate and varied, ranging from direct physical contact, such as pressing on specific points of the body, to performing "magnetic passes" without direct touch. These passes involved sweeping the hands over the patient's body, ostensibly to draw out stagnant fluid or infuse fresh energy. Patients were encouraged to surrender to the process, often entering a state of deep relaxation or heightened emotionality. The environment in Mesmer's treatment centers was also carefully orchestrated to enhance the therapeutic effect, utilizing dim lighting, soothing music, and a communal atmosphere to create a powerful, immersive experience that fostered a sense of expectation and susceptibility in the participants.

One of the most famous and elaborate methods employed by Mesmer, particularly in his Parisian clinics, was the use of the **baquet**. This large, circular wooden tub, often referred to as a "magnetic bath," was filled with water and iron filings, and sometimes bottles of magnetized water. Iron rods protruded from the baquet, which patients would apply to their affected body parts. Multiple patients could be treated simultaneously, sitting around the baquet and holding hands to form a "magnetic chain," which was believed to amplify the fluid's flow. Mesmer himself, often dressed in a distinctive lilac silk robe, would circulate among the patients, making magnetic passes and applying pressure to induce a "crisis." This crisis, ranging from convulsions and fainting to hysterical laughter or tears, was considered by Mesmer to be an essential part of the healing process, a cathartic release that signified the rebalancing of the magnetic fluid and the expulsion of disease.

#### 4. Key Characteristics and Phenomena

**Animal Magnetism:** The fundamental and defining principle of Mesmerism is the existence of an invisible, imponderable fluid, believed to permeate all matter and living beings. This fluid, which Mesmer termed **animal magnetism**, was hypothesized to be a universal force, akin to gravity or electricity, but specifically attuned to animate bodies. It was thought to be transferable between individuals and objects, and its free and balanced flow within the human body was considered essential for health. Any disruption or stagnation of this fluid was deemed the direct cause of illness, ranging from physical ailments to psychological distress. Practitioners of Mesmerism aimed to manipulate this fluid, either by direct touch, passes, or through magnetized objects, to restore

the patient's energetic equilibrium and thereby facilitate healing. This concept, though now discredited scientifically, laid the groundwork for future explorations into subtle energies and psychosomatic connections.

**Crisis and Cures:** A distinctive and often dramatic characteristic of Mesmerism was the concept of the "crisis" or "magnetic crisis." Mesmer believed that for a profound and lasting cure to manifest, the patient often had to undergo a powerful physiological and emotional reaction, sometimes resembling an epileptic fit or a hysterical outburst. These crises could include uncontrollable crying, laughter, shaking, convulsions, or fainting spells. Far from being seen as adverse reactions, these intense episodes were considered by Mesmer and his followers as a necessary cathartic release, indicating the successful expulsion of the diseased fluid and the re-establishment of a healthy magnetic flow. Following such a crisis, patients frequently reported feeling significantly better, experiencing relief from their symptoms, and a sense of renewed vitality. The public spectacle of these crises, particularly in communal treatment settings like the *baquet*, added to the enigmatic allure and widespread belief in Mesmerism's efficacy.

**Hypnotic States:** While Mesmer himself did not use the term "hypnosis" - a word coined much later by James Braid in the 1840s - his practices demonstrably induced trance-like states in many of his patients. These states, which were precursors to modern hypnotic phenomena, were characterized by deep relaxation, altered consciousness, heightened suggestibility, and sometimes a detachment from ordinary sensory perception. Patients in these states often exhibited phenomena such as catalepsy, where their limbs would remain in positions they were placed in, or amnesia for events occurring during the trance. The induction of these states, often through the mesmerist's focused gaze, verbal suggestions, and repetitive passes, revealed a powerful psychological component to Mesmerism that extended beyond the purely physical theory of animal magnetism. It was this aspect of Mesmerism, the observable effects on consciousness and suggestibility, that ultimately paved the way for the scientific investigation of hypnosis, shifting the focus from an invisible fluid to the power of the mind and interpersonal influence.

## 5. Cultural and Social Reception

Mesmerism quickly transcended its origins as a medical theory to become a significant cultural phenomenon, particularly flourishing in the intellectual and social melting pot of late 18th-century France. Its appeal was multi-faceted, drawing in a public disillusioned with traditional medicine, which often proved ineffective, painful, or even dangerous. Mesmer's clinics offered a novel, seemingly gentle, and profoundly experiential approach to healing, promising relief from a wide array of afflictions, from nervous disorders to paralysis. The dramatic displays of the "magnetic crisis" and the profound states of relaxation or emotional release experienced by patients created a powerful spectacle, captivating the public imagination and generating immense curiosity. This theatricality, combined with the promise of a universal cure, propelled Mesmerism into the heart of

Parisian society, sparking intense debate and discussion across all social strata.

The widespread interest in Mesmerism was so pervasive that it even drew the direct attention of highly influential figures, including Louis XVI, the King of France. The King, recognizing the growing public fascination and controversy surrounding Mesmer's methods, felt compelled to address the phenomenon. His concern stemmed not only from the medical efficacy claims but also from the potential social and moral implications of such a powerful and unregulated practice, particularly its influence over women. This royal intervention led to the establishment of the famous commissions of inquiry in 1784, tasked with scientifically evaluating Mesmer's claims. The involvement of the monarchy underscores the immense social penetration and perceived significance of Mesmerism, indicating its status as far more than just a fringe medical practice, but rather a societal force demanding official scrutiny.

Beyond its immediate therapeutic claims, Mesmerism offered a compelling alternative to the often brutal and ineffective conventional medical practices of the late 18th century. It tapped into a broader philosophical current of the Enlightenment, which sought rational and natural explanations for phenomena, even if Mesmer's own explanations bordered on the esoteric. The promise of an invisible, yet powerful, force that could restore health resonated with a public seeking hope and agency in an era of limited medical understanding. Furthermore, Mesmerism fostered a sense of communal experience and shared healing, especially in the group sessions around the baquet, which provided a psychological comfort and social bonding element often absent in individual doctor-patient interactions. This combination of novelty, perceived efficacy, and social engagement cemented Mesmerism's place as a pivotal cultural movement, reflecting both the scientific aspirations and the credulity of its time.

## 6. Debates, Criticisms, and Official Inquiries

From its very inception, Mesmerism encountered significant skepticism and outright opposition from the established scientific and medical communities. Mainstream physicians and scientists of the late 18th century were deeply suspicious of Mesmer's claims regarding animal magnetism, largely due to the absence of any tangible, measurable evidence for the existence of his hypothesized universal fluid. His methods were often dismissed as charlatanry, the effects attributed to imagination, suggestion, or outright deception, rather than to a genuine physical force. Critics pointed to the highly subjective and often inconsistent nature of the reported cures, as well as the dramatic, almost theatrical, reactions of patients during magnetic crises, which seemed to them more akin to hysteria than genuine therapeutic outcomes. This fundamental clash between Mesmer's speculative theory and the burgeoning empirical methodologies of Enlightenment science fueled a heated and often acrimonious debate, positioning Mesmerism at the forefront of scientific controversy.

The escalating public fascination and the scientific community's growing alarm prompted King Louis XVI to take decisive action. In 1784, he appointed two distinguished royal commissions to thoroughly investigate Mesmer's claims and practices. These commissions comprised some of the most eminent scientific and medical minds of the era, including renowned figures such as Benjamin Franklin (then the American ambassador to France), the chemist Antoine Lavoisier, the physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, and the astronomer Jean-Sylvain Bailly. Their mandate was clear: to determine, through rigorous experimentation, whether animal magnetism was a genuine physical force capable of producing the effects attributed to it, or if the observed phenomena could be explained by other factors. The scientific rigor applied by these commissions was groundbreaking, setting a precedent for future investigations into phenomena considered outside conventional scientific understanding.

The findings of these royal commissions were overwhelmingly negative and profoundly damaging to Mesmer's credibility. Through a series of carefully designed experiments, which included blind and double-blind trials, the commissions concluded that there was absolutely no evidence for the existence of animal magnetism as a physical fluid or force. Critically, they demonstrated that the effects observed in patients, such as convulsions or states of trance, occurred equally when patients believed they were being mesmerized, even if no "magnetic" influence was applied, and conversely, did not occur when patients were unaware of being treated, even if magnetic passes were performed. This seminal investigation effectively attributed the perceived effects of Mesmerism entirely to the power of **imagination** and **suggestion** (what was then called "imitation" or "touching"), rather than to any objective magnetic fluid. The commissions' report dealt a severe blow to Mesmer's reputation, forcing him to leave Paris and leading to a significant decline in the mainstream acceptance of his theories, although pockets of belief persisted for decades.

## 7. Legacy and Modern Perspectives

Despite the official condemnation by royal commissions and the eventual decline of Mesmerism as a distinct, recognized medical practice based on animal magnetism, its influence proved profound and surprisingly enduring. The intense public interest and the observable psychological effects produced by Mesmer's methods, particularly the induction of trance states, could not be entirely dismissed. Even as the fluid theory was debunked, the phenomena themselves--the suggestibility, the altered consciousness, and the symptomatic relief--persisted, compelling a new generation of investigators to explore their underlying mechanisms. This shift in focus from a physical fluid to psychological processes was a crucial turning point, laying the theoretical and practical groundwork for the later scientific study of suggestion and what would eventually be codified as hypnosis. Mesmerism, therefore, stands as a critical historical precursor to modern psychological therapy, demonstrating the powerful, albeit misunderstood, interaction between mind and body.

The practices associated with Mesmerism, particularly the induction of trance states through

passes, fixation, and verbal suggestion, directly influenced subsequent researchers who sought to understand these phenomena without subscribing to the animal magnetism theory. Figures like the Scottish surgeon James Braid, in the 1840s, explicitly acknowledged Mesmer's practical observations while rejecting his theoretical framework. Braid coined the term "hypnosis" (from the Greek word hypnos, meaning sleep) to describe the trance state, attributing it to physiological and psychological factors such as focused attention and fatigue of the nervous system, rather than an external fluid. This re-conceptualization marked the birth of modern hypnotism, divorcing it from the pseudoscientific trappings of Mesmerism and moving it towards a more empirical and psychological understanding. The legacy of Mesmerism thus resides not in the validation of its central theory, but in its accidental discovery of a powerful psychological technique that would eventually find legitimate application in medicine and psychology.

Today, while the concept of animal magnetism is largely considered pseudoscientific and is not recognized within mainstream science or medicine, the historical trajectory of Mesmerism continues to offer invaluable insights into several academic disciplines. It serves as a compelling case study in the evolution of medical thought, illustrating the transition from speculative, vitalistic theories to empirical, evidence-based practices. Furthermore, Mesmerism provides a rich context for understanding the psychology of suggestion, the placebo effect, and the complex interplay between popular culture, belief systems, and scientific inquiry. Its story illuminates how novel ideas, even those based on erroneous premises, can profoundly impact society and inadvertently contribute to the development of legitimate fields of study, such as psychology and psychotherapy. The enduring fascination with Mesmerism underscores humanity's persistent quest to understand and influence the mysterious connections between the mind, body, and healing.

## Further Reading

[Mesmerism - Wikipedia](#)

[Franz Mesmer - Wikipedia](#)

[Animal magnetism - Wikipedia](#)

[Hypnosis - Wikipedia](#)

[Louis XVI - Wikipedia](#)

[Baquet - Wikipedia](#)