

This three part series considers the history of hypnosis from early times to the present. The bulk of the history begins from the time of Mesmer and that is the focus of this first article.

In the subsequent articles in the series, positive and negative hypnosis are considered and how the early investigations stressed the different aspects of each.

The series, in its second chapter, goes on to examine why

the Nancy School gained precedence, stressing as it did positive hypnosis.

The final article in the series will explain why Freud abandoned hypnosis and why hypnosis declined with the rise in the psychoanalytic method and the discovery of chloroform.

Attention is then turned to the rise of experimentation in the 1930s and on to the Ericksonian approach of the present.

## A brief history of hypnosis – part one

# From Epidaurus' temples to Ericksonian therapists

By  
Ronald Shone

**R**eviewing the history of any subject is always useful in putting the subject into perspective. This is especially true of hypnosis because it is shrouded in so many confusions, misconceptions and unnecessary links with religion, magic and the supernatural. Hypnosis in some form has been known since the beginning of recorded history. Reference to it is to be found in the bible, while in the 'sleep' temples of ancient Greece, such as the Temple of Aesculapius at Epidaurus, it had primacy.

The 'sleep' temples were places of healing, and pilgrims travelled to them from far and wide. There were ritual offerings and other ceremonies to perform even before the individual entered the temple. In the temple the oracle was consulted. But how was it consulted? By inducing in the individual a trance state, *a state which today would be called hypnosis*. Of course the precise method of induction was the secret of the temple.

This is only marginally different from the miraculous cures associated with religious shrines throughout the Middle Ages and today. The shrine at Lourdes, where Bernadette Soubirous had visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1858, is today a place of pilgrimage and is associated with miraculous healing. Many cures take place in a setting where the individual is already in some heightened state of consciousness, an *altered state of consciousness*, and highly suggestible.



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It is not my intention to discuss either magic or miracles, but it is necessary from the outset to be aware that change during hypnosis often takes place in a setting of heightened suggestibility. It does not matter how this heightened suggestibility is brought about; what matters is that it is present. The only point being made here is that hypnosis has been with us throughout recorded time, often linked to healing, religion and even magic – but even this observation has an important implication. If such trance states have occurred throughout recorded time and do not appear to be associated with a particular sex or with a particular sub-section of the population, then we surely must conclude that it is a state of the human nervous system and *common to us all*.

What that early period had to say about hypnosis was in fact very little. **Since it was supposed to be religious, magical, or supernatural in origin then there was no point investigating it** because it was beyond the scope of human understanding.

### Significance of the Cabala

One idea from that early period is, however, important for our history – namely, the Cabala. The Cabala was a system of Jewish theosophy based on interpreting the Old Testament by a secret esoteric method which was passed down from one generation to the next only by word of mouth. It is from the Cabala that the idea of alchemy has its roots.

The ideas of the Cabalists entered the West with the three volume work of Cornelius Agrippa, the first volume of which appeared in 1531. Agrippa was hoping to reconcile the ideas of the Cabalists with Christianity, since *it was the teaching of Christianity – and most especially of the Christian fathers – which had turned the population against Cabalist lore*.

The ideas of the Cabalists were extended further by Paracelsus, a contemporary of Agrippa, who also did not see any inconsistency between the Cabala and Christianity.

The importance of alchemy in the Cabala is important for understanding the beginning of our history. Alchemy was concerned with a force which allowed *two inert substances to be transmuted into a third substance*. Exactly what this force is is still a secret to this day. It is the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life. Paracelsus

argued that **so long as the wisdom of the alchemist did not prevent him from mis-using the force**, then Cabalist doctrine and Christianity were reconcilable. The wise men, the magi, were holy men of God serving the forces of nature and not using those forces for their own ends. Paracelsus also put forward a theory which held that heavenly bodies exert a force on mankind.

Paracelsus argued that there existed a 'fluid' all around and that this 'fluid' meant that the heavenly bodies could influence mankind and therefore that men could influence each other. Furthermore, mankind was a microcosm of the heavens. What the theory was trying to explain was the influence of the planets on mankind and how one person could influence another person at a distance.



Anton Mesmer

### The Rise of Science

Although this was not the only explanation of how one body could influence another body at a distance, *all explanations relied on some vague magical process of linking*. With the rise of science in the seventeenth century, with its reaction against any mystical explanations, it had to explain the influence of the planets on man and man on each other at a distance. However, the scientists of the seventeenth century did not totally abandon the idea of 'spirit' or other non-material agents. What they did was embody them in a more mechanistic view of the world.

The development taking place from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries into the seventeenth century was that of a *science of matter*. Certainly, a common term in the writings of the seventeenth century was the 'effluvia'. It was this that was meant to explain the attraction of iron filings to a magnet. 'Effluvia' was considered to be 'rarefied matter'.

Although Descartes believed that all space contained matter (in other words the universe contained no empty space) and so the influence of one object on another was by direct and indirect contact, this view was not held by Newton. It was Newton who introduced semi-material 'ether' into scientific discourse.

It is hard to imagine that these 'scientific' explanations were much better. But from the point of view of our history, *they led to the theory of magnetism*. Bodies influenced each other at a distance because of a magnetic force. It was the Cabalist idea of 'fluid' combined with the seventeenth century development of magnetic effluvia which attracted Franz Mesmer, and it is with Mesmer that we begin our history.

*Mesmer believed his hands and the magnets he used increased the previously stagnant flows of magnetic fluid in his patients, which helped to heal them*

### Animal Magnetism

There is no doubt that Mesmer's work marks the beginning of the modern view of hypnosis, which is still sometimes referred to as *mesmerism*.

No one would suppose that Mesmer discovered hypnosis. As we have indicated it had been known about since the beginning of recorded history. What Mesmer did, however, was to embed it in a scientific framework and use it for healing.

In 1766 Mesmer argued that **the planets, in addition to affecting each other, also influenced all organized bodies – including man – through their effects on the fluid which occupies all space**. Of course 'the fluid which occupies all space' had its origins in the Cabala.

By the eighteenth century electricity, magnetism and heat were all considered as fluid forms of matter. *They differed from ordinary matter only in their weightlessness*. Consequently the 'magnetic effluvia' of Robert Boyle and the 'ether' of Isaac Newton were reinterpreted in the eighteenth century as 'fluids'.

Already by 1729 Stephen Gray had demonstrated that electrical effects were transmitted along wires and had an independent existence – it was truly an '*electric fluid*' and could even be stored. Mesmer's views about the magnetic force affecting bodies did not seem at all out of place.

With the idea that all things were part of the fluid it was only a short step to argue that illness was caused by the '*fluid*' not flowing properly in some way. In other words, the fluid became associated with the healing force.

Given the interest in magnetism and its connection with fluid forms of matter, why not use magnets to increase the healing flow? It was this idea which interested Maximilian Hehl, Professor of Astronomy at the University of Vienna. *With the aid of magnets Hehl helped an English lady overcome her cramps* on a visit to Vienna in 1774.

Soon after, while Mesmer was experimenting on a patient whom Mesmer was bleeding (still a common cure for many ailments), *he found that he could influence the rate of blood flow: increasing it by bringing a magnet closer and reducing it by moving the magnet further away*. He soon discovered that just by approaching the patient he could do the same.

He then found he could produce this effect simply by pointing his finger at the patient, or 'magnetising' some other object and using it. He concluded that **he himself**

**must be a form of magnet** and hence that magnetic force was not associated with minerals but with the magnetism of man – hence the term animal magnetism. He published his findings in a pamphlet in 1775 but it was not well received by the medical profession.

Before discussing Mesmer's approach to animal magnetism in terms of hypnosis, it will be useful to continue to outline his flamboyant approach to his patients.

### Mesmeric Effects

Mesmer believed that his hands and the magnets he used increased the previously stagnant flows of magnetic fluid in his patients and it was this which helped to heal them. He created a tub which held water and iron filings, together with magnets connected to each other immersed in the liquid. *The magnetized power was sprayed around the room* by means of a metal nozzle.

He even 'magnetized' the trees and the fountain in his garden. The result was that patients went into trances, catatonic states, convulsions, dissociative states where they were speaking in strange voices, and so on. Both he and his patients believed that all this was necessary for the healing process. When they came out of these states they often felt much better.

His success in Paris led him to be even more flamboyant. He would enter his treatment rooms in a lilac silk dressing gown, carrying a 'magnetic wand' which he pointed at his patients, who were formed in a circle, men alternating with women, touching at the thighs to increase the magnetic flow between them.

**Having touched them all with his wand he would then play a magnetized piano.**

Many of his patients fell into convulsions and collapsed to the floor. Again, afterwards many patients felt much better.

In order to understand what went on we must ask two basic questions:

- Was there any scientific basis for animal magnetism?
- Notwithstanding the answer to the first question, why did patients go into various types of trance states and come out feeling much better?

*Mesmer only had to point to them to elicit a  
response – today these states would be  
regarded as hysterical*

The first question was addressed by the Royal Commission of Inquiry which was set up by Louis XVI in 1784, and headed by Benjamin Franklin. They concluded that although patients did go into convulsions and often felt better as a result, this had nothing to do with animal magnetism. **The magnetic fluid did not exist and since it did not exist it could have no healing effects.** They further concluded that the patients' responses were most likely the result of Mesmer's strong powers of suggestion. They emphasized that from their observations patients appeared completely under his control. While they were in a state of apparent drowsiness, *Mesmer only had to say something, or point to them, for them to respond.*

The view of the Commission concerning animal magnetism is held to this day. Of more significance is the second question and the Commission's conclusion that it was all to do with suggestion. **Patients went into states which today would be regarded as hysterical.**

Today such hysterical responses to hypnosis do not occur. Does this mean that their responses were, in fact, a result of animal magnetism and that not using magnets today we do not obtain the same responses? Why were hysterical responses the typical reactions in the time of Mesmer? This is a difficult question but one that needs an answer even in this early stage of our investigation. There are two interrelated reasons.

### ‘Expected’ Response?

First, because it was considered that since the trance was brought about by a magnetic force this was the ‘right’ response to such a force. Mesmer *expected* his patients to react in this way and his patients *responded accordingly*. But it is not only in hypnosis that actual behaviour conforms with expected behaviour. People expect drunks to behave in certain ways, for women or men to behave in certain ways, for children to behave in certain ways. Throughout our lives we govern our actual behaviour to a large extent according to what is expected of us.

**The argument being advanced here is that it was general considered that this is what people did when in a trance.**

A second, more scientific, reason is that the trance states created at the time of Mesmer were largely *negative* hypnotic states rather than the *positive* hypnotic state produced today. Briefly, a negative hypnotic state is created by activating the sympathetic nervous system while positive hypnosis activates the parasympathetic nervous system.

**A very active sympathetic nervous system is typical of hysteria. Hysteria and the sympathetic nervous system interrelate in the sense that a cataleptic state can only be achieved by activating the sympathetic nervous system.**



Anton Mesmer employing *animal magnetism* at his Paris salon

## The end of Mesmer

In relation to the sympathetic and parasympathetic stimulation a second observation immediately arises from the Committee's findings. If we discount the hypothesis that the magnets had anything to do with the trance state then what, or who, activated the patients' sympathetic nervous system? *The patients themselves*. But even this is too simplistic.

*What made the patients stimulate their sympathetic nervous system?*

The activating element was, in fact, recognized by the Royal Commission but its full significance was not appreciated.

**In their opinion imagination was a major factor in the response of patients.**

They also recognized that Mesmer had a strong suggestive influence on his patients. It was these two elements together which were of major importance.

But we must not forget a third element which was always present – namely, the patients' belief in Mesmer and in animal magnetism. It does not matter whether animal magnetism existed. What mattered was the patients' belief in Mesmer's power to cure them through animal magnetism.

We can conclude, therefore, that three elements appear to be present during hypnosis:

- Imagination
- Suggestibility
- Belief

Although Mesmer was totally mistaken about magnetism, he was well aware of his influence on patients and of the importance of establishing a good relationship with them. *This he called rapport, a term used to this day*. As was noted much later, rapport is the condition in which the patient has confidence and belief in what the physician says and does; in this condition, the suggestions of the hypnotist are more likely to be carried out. How well suggestions are carried out

appears to be linked with how well developed is the individual's imagination.

**Rapport without a good imagination on the part of the person being hypnotised is not likely to be very successful.**

The Commission's findings effectively brought an end to the successful career of Mesmer. Animal magnetism however did not immediately disappear, largely because of investigation and comment by Laurent de Jussieu, a botanist by training. He noted that patients went into trance even when Mesmer was not in sight and was some six feet away.

**Some patients even went into convulsions while Mesmer moved his finger behind them and, more significantly, continued in this way while his finger was moving but stopped when Mesmer stopped.**

Jussieu argued that such actions might well arise from the existence of a magnetic fluid.

### Telepathy

A more modern view might be that this was telepathy and not animal magnetism; which simply replaces the term '*animal magnetism*' with the equally unsatisfactory term '*telepathy*'.

**Whatever it is called, we must still explain the influence of one individual on another at a distance and possibly without the other being aware of it.**

This was apparent to Jussieu but not to the Commission. To say it is telepathy, where we understand this to be the thought of one person manifesting itself in the mind of another person, begs the question of how the thought moved from the sender to the receiver.

To put it in the same terms as Jussieu: does the telepathic transfer of a thought take place because of the '*magnetic fluid*'. Thus, Jussieu posed a doubt which was not addressed by the Commission and so enabled some people to continue to believe in the existence and effect of animal magnetism.

*The second part of the history of hypnosis by Ronald Shone will appear in the October issue of the EJCH. It examines clairvoyance, Braid, Elliotson, the Nancy School and psychoanalysis. The third and final piece takes us through to hypnosis as it is practised today.*