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MESMER MINUS MAGIC: Hypnosis and Modern Medicine

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Abstract: The implications and effects of the French commission that passed judgment on Mesmer’s work is examined in light of the pioneering role of hypnosis as the first Western conception of a psychotherapy, the ancient philosophical debate between idealism and empiricism, and the conflict in modern medicine between biotechnological emphasis on cure and the need for care as many previously terminal illnesses are converted to chronic diseases. The panel’s report is interpreted as negative about the literal theory of animal magnetism but actually supportive of the potential therapeutic power of suggestion and “positive thinking.” This aspect of hypnosis is described as a forerunner of modern cognitive therapies of depression and other illnesses. The panel exerted a constructive effect in applying scientific method and rigorous evaluation to hypnotic treatment, an application of Enlightenment philosophy that presaged the Flexner era in modern medicine. Both hypnosis and medicine ultimately benefited.

The great historian of the unconscious, Henri Ellenberger, credits hypnosis with being the first Western conception of a psychotherapy, a talking interaction between doctor and patient that could lead to the patient’s benefit (Ellenberger, 1970). Given the importance of this conceptual contribution alone, one would think that hypnosis would have been greeted with considerable enthusiasm. Yet its path has hardly been strewn with roses. Among the many obstacles to its utilization was the report of the Commission headed by Benjamin Franklin, which is the subject of this special issue. Certainly, 18th-century medicine would have benefited from a dose of its own medicine: healthy skepticism. The patients subjected to endless rounds of bloodletting with leeches would have benefited even more from such a tough-minded review of the theory and evidence of practice (except for those with congestive heart failure or polycythemia Vera, who may have benefited inadvertently from volume reduction). To those of us trained to recognize the defense mechanism of projection, it will come as no surprise that the very group that needed scrutiny perceived the problem as being in an outsider instead.

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THE COMMISSION

The composition of the panel was fascinating. Led by our own Benjamin Franklin, noted scientist and one of the architects of American democracy, it also included four other members of the Academy of Sciences, including the famous chemist, Lavoisier, and the scientist, Bailly. Four prominent physicians from the Faculty of Medicine were also members, including a doctor well known for his work in pain control, the infamous Dr. Guillotin. One would certainly have been more than a little nervous to be examined by such a group, notable in intellect and politically powerful. The very prestige of the panel attests to the importance of Mesmer and hypnosis, and the magnitude of the threat he posed to standard medical practice in France.

THE REPORT

I have one of the original printings of the Report, and it makes for very interesting reading. When I first read it, I was surprised at its rather balanced and respectful tone. Given the devastating effect of the report on Mesmer’s career and hypnosis in the 19th century, I had expected a diatribe. Instead, one encounters a carefully worded and thoughtful analysis of Mesmer’s rationale and methods. The panel mainly takes issue with Mesmer’s theory of magnetic influence, criticizing the idea that magnetic fields in the “magnetizer” or baquets that Mesmer utilized could affect some kind of magnetic field in the patient. Magnetism is a terrific metaphor for the influence of one human over another—we feel “drawn to” or “repelled by” people. The prevailing science of the day, physics, concerned itself with the puzzle of influence at a distance: gravity and magnetism were two leading problems. It is not at all uncommon that psychological science takes a page from prevailing science, witness our current interest in computational models of consciousness, for example.

Mesmer’s problem, from the Commission’s point of view, was that he was too literal, positing real rather than symbolic magnetic fields of influence, and the Commission was clearly correct. However, it went on to a fascinating discussion of the power of social influence. The Commissioners noted that this is fundamental to the social order, it is how “parents raise children, generals run armies, kings run countries.” So the panel recognized that there was great power in social influence and that such power could be used to therapeutic effect. They were clearly less than impressed with any claims of special effect for the hypnotic form of influence but were not averse to the study and practice of the utilization of social influence. And given the difficulty kings were having running that particular country, they might well have made better use of hypnotic and other influence.
MESMER'S RESPONSE

Indeed, Mesmer and the work of his disciples became the flash point for tension between popular desires and the medical/scientific establishment of the day (Darnton, 1968). Mesmer sought to mobilize popular opinion against the conclusions of the panel, accusing it of being a political rather than a scientific body. According to Darnton,

The report only made the mesmerists boil over in a flood of works defending their cause, the cause of humanity, as they saw it, against a cabal of self-interested academicians. In pamphlet after pamphlet they repeated the same arguments. The commission exposed its bias by refusing to investigate the orthodox doctrine practiced by Mesmer; the imagination alone could not produce the extraordinary effects of mesmerizing; the commissioners had neglected the most important evidence of the fluid’s power, the hundreds of cures it had performed; and, in any case, nothing could be more certain than the lethal character of conventional medicine. (p. 64).

Actually, a randomized trial that involved sending every other medically ill patient to Mesmer rather than a French physician of the day would undoubtedly have favored hypnosis. At the least, he was following the oldest medical adage: primum non nocere—first of all, do no harm. Mesmer himself was enough of a charismatic figure with a practice composed of highly placed individuals that even the king did not dare subject him to direct review. Rather, the work of one of his hapless disciples became the object of scrutiny.

Oddly enough, many of the mesmeric speculations regarding the effects of magnetized fluids that were so devastatingly disproved by the Commission were not too different from the theories of modern science of the day, such as Lavoisier’s “caloric” theory (Darnton 1968, p. 10). The point is that each side projected its weaknesses onto the other. The medical/scientific establishment ignored the speculative components of its own theories by attacking those in Mesmer’s; the hypnotists asserted the “science” of their work by focusing on clinical outcome rather than the power of its magnetic fluids, a type of situation once referred to by Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter as the “cross-sterilization of disciplines.” Indeed, the best of science in the era of the Enlightenment emphasized the puzzle of influence at a distance: Gravity and magnetism were but two examples of forces that fascinated but could not be fully explained. It is not surprising, nor as implausible as it now seems, that the leading theorist of hypnosis would seek explanation for psychological influence in the science of physical influence. He foundered by being too concrete in the transduction of suggestion, not in the idea of a science of influence.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

The battle between mesmerists and academicians in late-18th-century France can be seen as but one further iteration of the ancient philo-
sophical dispute between the idealists and the empiricists, Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, truth lay in the realm of ideas, with reality being but an imperfect approximation, typified by his famous “Allegory of the Cave” (Plato, trans. 1961). Mesmerists often affiliated with spiritualism (Darnton, 1968) and asserted that interpersonal magnetic force was transduced through fluid and proved by convulsions and cures. The Commission disproved the specific efficacy of the transducing fluid and therefore discredited Mesmer’s theories. Yet, they accepted the more abstract notion of the shaping effect of social influence. However, the thrust of their report was that the intangible world of influence and spirit was secondary to the tangible proof of concrete effects.

REDEFINITION OF THE FIELD

Despite Mesmer’s defeat at the hands of the Commission, the phenomenon simply would not disappear. Braid concurred with the rejection of magnetic theory, emphasized the role of suggestion, and coined the term hypnotism (Braid, 1843). Esdaile demonstrated remarkable surgical anesthesia effects of hypnosis while performing amputations in India (Esdaile, 1846/1957). His clinical accomplishment was greeted with a combination of skepticism and hostility. He was severed from his hospital affiliation in Scotland. When, 10 years later, ether anesthesia was first demonstrated at the Massachusetts General Hospital, the surgeon strode to the front of the surgical amphitheater (now known as the “Ether Dome”) and pronounced, “Gentlemen, this is no humbug,” to distinguish the ether demonstration from the effects of hypnosis. Because ether reportedly produced 90% surgical anesthesia and hypnosis only 80%, Esdaile retracted his original report. It has taken more than a century for us to rediscover that the brain can modulate pain functioning as an intact unit, rather than through pharmacological or other peripheral means (Chaves, 1994; Hilgard & Hilgard, 1975; Holroyd, 1996; McGlashan, Evans, & Orne, 1969; D. Spiegel, Bierre, & Rootenberg, 1989; D. Spiegel & Bloom, 1983).

Emile Coue studied with Liebault and returned to America with a focus on the power of the imagination. This is quite consistent with the positive statements about the role of suggestion in the Commission’s report. Indeed, it is striking that most postmesmeric hypnotists acted as though they had read and accepted the conclusions of the report, although some lesser lights still clung to the idea of an actual magnetic fluid that flowed between hypnotist and subject (Sinnett, 1892). Braid emphasized suggestion, Coue that plus imagination. The latter is famous for his self-administered mantra: “Every day and in every way I get better and better” (Coue, 1923). He taught that imagination transcends the will and beat Norman Vincent Peale to the “power of positive thinking.” Although his writing seems a bit clichéd now, one could certainly argue that modern cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy of
depression owes a page or two to Coue's idea that imagination drives will and mood. Writing and teaching about hypnosis in the 19th and early 20th centuries was largely in the medical context, emphasizing treatment of medical problems and use during surgical procedures. Gradually, the focus of professional interest shifted from physicians and surgeons to psychologists and psychiatrists (Moll, 1891).

Hippolyte Bernheim at the famous French school at Nancy emphasized the role of suggestion in hypnosis (Bernheim, 1889/1964) and further contributed the idea that hypnosis was a sign of normal rather than pathological mental function. This normalization of hypnosis was important for its acceptance both by the public and later the medical profession, especially given that the famous neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot, utilized hypnosis as a demonstration of hysterical disorders (Charcot, 1890). Breuer and Freud (Breuer & Freud, 1893-1895/1995) began their exploration of the unconscious with hypnosis, learned by Freud as a student of Charcot's. They came up with the rather prescient idea that hypnotic ability might be a diathesis for the expression of neurotic conflict, rather than a cause per se or an indication of such conflicts. This stress-diathesis model of hypnosis in the etiology of trauma-related symptoms continues to attract attention and empirical support (Butler, Duran, Jasiukatis, Koopman, & Spiegel, 1996). Freud later famously rejected the trauma theory of the etiology of neuroses and hypnosis. However, toward the end of his career, he noted that the "pure gold" of analysis might have to be supplemented with the "baser metal" of suggestion. In his office on the Bergasse in Vienna, he had placed a drawing of an archeological dig, consistent with his fascination with those aspects of human experience that are deeply buried. However, in decorating his last office in London, he chose the sacred spot over the analytic couch for a famous photograph of Charcot inducing hypnotic catalepsy. Thus, at the end of his career and at a time when his reputation was in the ascendency, he revisited hypnosis. The resilience of the phenomenon despite repeated rejections is testimony to its importance.

HYPNOSIS IN MODERN MEDICINE

Another iteration of the struggle for the heart and mind of medicine and of hypnosis' marginal but crucial role occurs today. Modern scientific biotechnological medicine has never been stronger, and medicine has come a long way from the era in which it was a trade. Surgeons used to be barbers, hence the red (for blood) in the barber pole and the fact that when a British physician becomes a surgeon, he drops the term "Dr." and is henceforth referred to as "Mr." With the Flexner report in the early 20th century, the model for medicine became professional scientific training rather than apprenticeship, and science became the cornerstone of modern medicine. Increasingly, basic science informed the understanding of disease and the development of treatments, and controlled,
randomized clinical trials became the standard for evaluating the effectiveness of these treatments. We can now cure many infectious diseases that claimed millions of lives, save victims of trauma, prevent heart disease, and cure some kinds of cancer while delaying the progression of others. Despite this triumph of empiricism (Aristotle would smile), the materialist, body-as-a-machine model of medicine still faces opposition. Forty-two percent of Americans seek and pay for alternative and complementary medical treatments (Eisenberg, Davis, & Ettner, 1997), up by one percent of the population per year since 1990 (Eisenberg et al., 1993). Americans spend more out-of-pocket money on complementary care than on primary medical or hospital care. They most often seek such treatments for chronic problems such as pain and illness-related anxiety (D. Spiegel, 1997; D. Spiegel, Stroud, & Fyfe, 1998), but seek it they do, as if reproaching bioscience for not attending to the problems of coping as well as the illness, the dis-ease as well as the disease. The mind will not be ignored—there is truth in the realm of ideas as well as in the body.

Hypnosis, viewed in mainstream medicine as alternative, in the alternative medicine world as mainstream, has accommodated to the demands of the scientific model by subjecting itself to measurement. Developments such as hypnotizability scales (Hilgard, 1965; H. Spiegel & Spiegel, 1978), correlations with personality attributes (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974; Tellegen, 1981), studies of effects of hypnosis on brain function (Aikins & Ray, 2001; Crawford, Gur, Skolnick, Gur, & Benson, 1993; De Pascalis, 1994; Faymonville et al., 2000; Kallio, Revonsuo, Hämäläinen, Markela, & Gruzelier, 2001; Kosslyn, Thompson, Costantini-Ferrando, Alpert, & Spiegel, 2000; Rainville, Duncan, Price, Carrier, & Bushnell, 1997; D. Spiegel & Barabasz, 1990; Williams & Gruzelier, 2001), and randomized clinical trials (Lang et al., 2000; Whorwell, Prior, & Faragher, 1984) brought science into the world of hypnosis and hypnosis into the world of scientific medicine. Indeed, the academy has, to some extent, relented, offering official sanction of hypnosis as a therapeutic technique through the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association and featured for review articles in major journals (Hall & Crasilneck, 1978).

Hypnosis has achieved grudging acceptance in modern medicine. It is taught at many of the best medical schools but certainly not all of them. It is viewed as an interesting adjunct but not required training for physicians. Medicine in the United States has moved from an era when science was the dominant culture to one in which medicine as business has taken over. Health care professionals are demeaned with the term provider, and time with patients is ratcheted down by insurance companies focused on the bottom line. Learning skills directed at effective interpersonal communication and teaching self-control of anxiety and pain may seem a low priority to physicians beset by preauthorization struggles, poor collection rates, and decreased time with patients. Nonetheless, centuries of
experience with hypnosis teaches that the relationship is an intervention in and of itself, a therapeutic tool of considerable power and versatility.

Nonetheless, hypnosis retains the curse of the intangible, being a mental rather than a physical phenomenon, requiring a leap of the imagination to comprehend psychological influence over neural and somatic function. Hypnosis struggles for respect yet will never find itself entirely welcome in the company of gene chips, DNA biochemistry, magnetic resonance imaging, and noninvasive surgical procedures.

It has been said that you learn what you can do from your friends; you learn what you must do from your enemies. The field of hypnosis learned what it must do from the Commission: subject our work to rigorous scientific scrutiny, dispense with extraneous theory, and concentrate on the true strengths of the phenomenon. Grudging respect is better than official disdain. Thanks, Ben.

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Mesmer minus Zauberei: Hypnose und die moderne Medizin

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Mesmer sans la magie: Hypnose et médecine moderne

David Spiegel

Résumé: Les implications et les effets de la commission française qui a émis le jugement sur le travail de Mesmer est examinées à la lumière du rôle pilote de l'hypnose comme première conception occidentale d'une psychothérapie, de la discussion philosophique antique entre l'idéalisme et l'empirisme, et du conflit dans la médecine moderne entre l'accent biotechnologique du traitement et le besoin de soin pour autant de maladies dites précédemment terminales qui sont converties en maladies chroniques. Les affirmations de la commission sont interprétées négativement sur la théorie littérale du magnétisme animal mais est réellement un soutien de la puissance thérapeutique potentielle de la suggestion et de la “pensée positive.” Cet aspect de l'hypnose est décrit comme précurseur des thérapies cognitives modernes pour la dépression et d'autres maladies. La commission a exercé un effet constructif en appliquant la méthode scientifique et l'évaluation rigoureuse au traitement hypnotique, une application de philosophie de clarification qui
a présagé l'ère de Flexner dans la médecine moderne. L'hypnose et la médecine en ont finalement bénéficié.

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Mesmer menos magia: La hipnosis y la medicina moderna

David Spiegel
Resumen: Las implicaciones y los efectos de la comisión Francesa que pasó fallo sobre el trabajo de Mesmer se examinan en vista del papel fundamental de la hipnosis como la primera concepción Occidental de una psicoterapia, de la antigua discusión filosófica entre el idealismo y el empiricismo, y del conflicto en la medicina moderna entre el énfasis biotecnológico en la cura y la necesidad de cuidado personal conforme muchas enfermedades anteriormente terminales se convierten en crónicas. Interpreto al informe de la comisión como negativo sobre la teoría literal de magnetismo animal pero realmente sustentador del potencial poder terapéutico de la sugestión y el “pensamiento positivo.” Describo a este aspecto de la hipnosis como un antecedente de las terapias cognitivas modernas para la depresión y otras enfermedades. El Panel de la comisión tuvo un efecto constructivo al utilizar el método científico y una evaluación rigurosa del tratamiento hipnótico; lo que constituye una aplicación de la filosofía de la edad de la Iluminación que presagió la época de Flexner en la medicina moderna. En última instancia, tanto la hipnosis como la medicina se beneficiaron.

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