Franz Anton Mesmer Biography

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Biography

The German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) developed a healing technique called mesmerism that is the historical antecedent of hypnosis.

Franz Mesmer was born on May 23, 1734, in the village of Itznang, Switzerland. At age 15 he entered the Jesuit College at Dillingen in Bavaria, and from there he went in 1752 to the University of Ingolstadt, where he studied philosophy, theology, music, and mathematics. Eventually he decided on a medical career. In 1759 he entered the University of Vienna, receiving a medical degree in 1766.

Mesmer then settled in Vienna and began to develop his concept of an invisible fluid in the body that affected health. At first he used magnets to manipulate this fluid but gradually came to believe these were unnecessary, that, in fact, anything he touched became magnetized and that a health-giving fluid emanated from his own body. Mesmer believed a rapport with his patients was essential for cure and achieved it with diverse trappings. His treatment rooms were heavily draped, music was played, and Mesmer appeared in long, violet robes.

Mesmer's methods were frowned upon by the medical establishment in Vienna, so in 1778 he moved to Paris, hoping for a better reception for his ideas. In France he achieved overwhelming popularity, except among physicians. On the basis of medical opinion, repeated efforts were made by the French government to discredit Mesmer. At a time of political turmoil and revolution, such efforts were viewed as attempts to prevent the majority's enjoyment of health, and the popularity of mesmerism continued unabated. However, under continued pressure Mesmer retired to Switzerland at the beginning of the French Revolution, where he spent the remaining years of his life.

Critics focused attention of Mesmer's methods and insisted that cures existed only in the patient's mind. The 19th-century studies of Mesmer's work by James Braid and others in England demonstrated that the important aspect of Mesmer's treatment was the patient's reaction. Braid introduced the term "hypnotism" and insisted that hypnotic phenomena were essentially physiological and not associated with a fluid. Still later studies in France by A. A. Liebeault and Hippolyte Bernheim attributed hypnotic phenomena to psychological forces, particularly suggestion. While undergoing this scientific transformation in the 19th century, mesmerism, in other quarters, became more closely associated with occultism, spiritualism, and faith healing, providing in the last instance the basis for Christian Science.