The Problem of Mesmerism

Rebecca Davies Wilson

In 1784 the political and academic authorities of Paris, France were faced with a problem that threatened the stability of not only natural philosophy, but also the entire social order. This problem came in the unlikely form of an immensely popular healing therapy based on Franz Mesmer's theory of animal magnetism. The ensuing mesmerism investigation pitted popular fad against natural philosophical institutions, ultimately resulting in the condemnation of Mesmer's theory. It was after this condemnation, however, that the real difficulties emerged—the commissioners' conclusion attributed new power to the faculty of the imagination, which was now seen as the source of political and social unrest. The way in which mesmerism was investigated also brought to light discrepancies between the standards of objectivity and empiricism upheld by the commissioners, and the way in which these individuals actually practiced empirical natural philosophy. Furthermore, the mesmerism investigation of 1784 revealed the fear felt by both political and philosophical institutions that their position of authority over the public could be undermined. These troubling implications of the mesmerism investigation, with respect to social, political, and natural philosophical realms, will be explored. Ultimately, mesmerism was a problem because it challenged the social, political and natural philosophical structures, methods, and institutions of the period.

In the spring of 1784, the Baron de Breteuil, Minister of the Department of Paris, established two official commissions to investigate Franz Mesmer's theory of animal magnetism, which had notoriously become a polarizing issue in both social and philosophical spheres in France. The first commission belonged to the Academy of Sciences and the Faculty of Medicine; its investigators included Joseph-Ignace Guillotin and Jean Darcet, and it was co-chaired by Antoine Lavoisier and Benjamin Franklin. The second commission, from the Royal Society of Medicine, was led by Pierre-Isaac Poissionier and included the notable naturalist Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu.[1] The appointment of these institutional commissions showed that though the theory in question was immensely popular with the public, the natural philosophic institutions of the period perceived it to be very problematic.

For Mesmer, however, animal magnetism was a logically sound system fitting well within, and contradicting none of, the empirical natural philosophical discourses that prevailed at this time. Based on "the familiar principles of universal attraction," Mesmer posited that just as the celestial bodies exert attractive forces upon earthly phenomena in nature, so too do these planets affect "animate bodies." The conduit for this influence acting at such an extreme distance was 'an all-penetrating fluid' that Mesmer named animal magnetism.[2] Though this esoteric force could not be seen, it was enough that it was felt—this placed it for Mesmer in line with other theories of invisible

[1] Jessica Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science," in *The Sixth Sense Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 130.

[2] Franz Anton Mesmer, *Mesmerism* (Sequim WA: Holmes Publishing Group LLC, 1998), 6.

forces "such as gravity, cohesion, elasticity, irritability, electricity, and others."[3] Benjamin Franklin himself had by this time designed "a natural philosophy of weather based on his empirically defined electric 'fluid;'" in his theory, this fluid became charged when enough friction was produced between salt and water particles in the ocean, which produced thunder and lightning.[4] Mesmerism, like Franklin's theory, was deeply rooted in sensible phenomena; Franklin relied primarily upon visible experience, while Mesmer's theory was based on what was *felt* in the body. Mesmer went so far as to declare that the senses, as the human's primary access to truth in the world, are the source of all knowledge, and that it is upon this notion of human sensory experience that his theory was founded.[5]

Like the 'ebb and flow' of the tides caused by the planets, Mesmer claimed that the human body too is prone to variations in the intensity and amount of the animal magnetism it possesses. This fluid can become depleted; such a depletion manifests itself as physical and mental illness. When an imbalance occurs, individuals who are fortunate enough to be endowed with a surplus of animal magnetism, such as Mesmer himself, may transmit this fluid to an ailing patient, thereby healing them.[6] Mesmer worked with a variety of therapeutic methods of transmission, using magnets early on to channel this force but eventually turning solely to the use of the practitioner's hands. For him, animal magnetism was ultimately best conducted to animate bodies via an animate body.[7]

As the popularity of mesmerism took off, it became the source of much speculation on the part of members of natural philosophic institutions. Mesmer himself was aware that many of his academic contemporaries doubted the legitimacy of his treatment, and thus was eager to dispel doubt by demonstrating his method to others.[8] An aura of controversy surrounded the efficacy of his cures; though Mesmer writes confidently of having cured three female patients of blindness, he laments that once one of these patients returned home, her parents "compelled her to imitate fits of blindness,"[9] thus discrediting Mesmer's cure. The irresolvable disputability of Mesmer's therapy led to the King's institution of the two commissions to conclusively determine whether animal magnetic forces were indeed responsible for the effects produced in mesmerism clients.

The mesmerism investigation holds immense significance, particularly in the modern field of psychology, as marking "the first deliberately psychological tests"[10] as well as being the first use of a "placebo sham."[11] The first thing the commissioners did to determine the efficacy of the treatment was (perhaps understandably) to have it performed on themselves, but the primary method undertaken in order to investigate mesmerism was a two-part empirical experiment designed by Antoine Lavoisier. Though Mesmer was eager to allow the investigators to observe him as he performed his work, the investigators could not be satisfied by this alone. They operated under the assumption that if animal magnetism were valid, it would maintain its efficacy when isolated from the other therapeutic factors, such as practitioner/patient relationship, atmosphere of the treatment room, and expectation of certain experiences or results. Thus, the experiment was

---

[3] Mesmer, *Mesmerism,* 7.
[4] Geoffrey Sutton, "Electric Medicine and Mesmerism," *Isis* 72, 3 (1981): 375-392.
[5] Mesmer, *Mesmerism,* 5.
[6] Roberta Bivins, *Alternative Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81.
[7] Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science", 125.
[8] Mesmer, *Mesmerism,* 7; 19.
[9] Ibid., 23.
[10] Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science," 135.
[11] Ibid., 119.

designed with the goal of isolating the mesmeric effects from the environment of the practitioner's treatment room as well as from the knowledge of what was taking place.[12] It is also important to note that the investigators designed and conducted this study with the assumption that animal magnetism was a delusion resulting from effects of the imagination.[13] With this in mind, the goal of the experiment was explicitly stated as "[the isolation of] the imagination from the hypothetical fluid"[14] and vice versa.

In Lavoisier's study, randomly selected individuals, as opposed to long-time clients of Mesmer's, were chosen to partake in one of two components of the experiment. The first part was to mesmerize individuals without their knowledge. In one example, a woman was invited over 'under the pretext of wanting some washing done,' and was treated by a concealed practitioner with mesmeric fluid for thirty minutes. This trial, as well as all other trials of this type, resulted in no mesmeric effects: the subjects did not suffer any 'crises' of writhing or convulsing.[15]

The second part of the experiment involved convincing a sample of individuals that they were being 'mesmerized,' when in fact no such transmission was taking place. In this experiment, a variety of tactics were used, such as blindfolding the subject and then verbally acknowledging a nonexistent mesmeric practitioner. Many subjects of the study experienced the type of effects associated with mesmeric treatment when this treatment was not in fact taking place.[16] Ultimately the investigators denounced the legitimacy of mesmerism, insisting instead that the dramatic experiences attributed to this force were due to "unproblematic, physical causes" such as "the extended application of hands," as well as, most significantly, the faculty of the imagination.[17]

Mesmer's theory did not provoke the interest and attention of natural philosophic institutions merely because of its ambiguous legitimacy. While it is clear that mesmerism was very problematic in the eyes of these philosophic authorities, recent scholars disagree as to what exactly made mesmerism such a concerning issue. One reason for the notoriety of Mesmer's therapy was the fits or 'crises' that were often triggered by the transmission of this magnetic force.[18] Perhaps troubling to more conservative empiricists of the time was the inherent theatricality of this practice: typically, female patients entering a dimly lit room to share with an eccentrically-clothed male practitioner a mysterious and intimate encounter that induces in them episodes of fainting, writhing, and/or uncontrollable physical movements and sensations.[19] According to Roberta Bivins, it was the questionable nature of this intimate, potentially sexual interaction between male practitioner and female patient that alarmed the commissioners and incited their condemnation of mesmerism.

Geoffrey Sutton, in contrast, argues that the rejection of mesmerism by these academic institutions was triggered by political, rather than moral, tensions. Though Mesmer was eager to demonstrate his method, the way in which he harnessed the magnetic fluid was itself a well-kept secret; "as time passed [mesmerism] became an increasingly mystical art, the secrets more closely guarded."[20] Mesmer would not divulge exactly how this phenomenon took place to the commissioners because this knowledge could only belong to the worthy, initiated student of

[12] Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science", 136.
[13] Ibid., 130.
[14] Ibid., 136.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 138.
[18] Ibid., 125.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Sutton, "Electric Medicine and Mesmerism", 386.

mesmerism. The deeply esoteric nature of this practice was not only well known, it was even flaunted—Mesmer was claiming autonomy outside the approval of academic philosophical institutions, and this was a problem. In his comparison of Mesmer to Mesmer's contemporaries Le Dru and Mauduyt (whose theories of subtle fluids were remarkably continuous with that of Mesmer's), Sutton finds that "the academicians based their 'reasoned judgement' of Mesmer, Le Dru, and Mauduyt as much on the social status of the therapist as on the empirical status of the therapy."[21] Put differently, mesmerism could not have been discredited based on empirical evidence alone, for this was lacking on both sides. Rather, Mesmer was rejected based on his exclusion from the institutions of academia from which he had boldly (though perhaps foolishly) exerted independence.[22]

For Jessica Riskin, however, mesmerism was ultimately most problematic because of the way in which it caricaturized the empirical natural philosophy of its time. To denounce mesmerism, one could not claim it was not empirical; empirical at this time meant entirely verified by sensory experience. Sensory experience in fact was the cornerstone of this practice; mesmerism was based on a collection of physical sensations that were *felt* by those who received the magnetic fluid. The problem, of course, was that the only one who could verify the transmission of Mesmer's fluid was the patient receiving the fluid; it was on this individual's experience that the legitimacy of mesmerism hinged. Thus, Mesmer had prioritized individual sensation to an extent that revealed the inherent difficulties with basing one's empirical inquiry into the natural world entirely on individual sensation. This ultimately forced the commissioners to depart from such a viewpoint, granting the imaginative faculty the power to undermine the relationship between subject and senses. This subtle shift would reshape the landscape of natural philosophical discourse as the commissioners knew it.

In concluding that imagination was responsible for producing the sensations that had been attributed to mesmeric fluid, the commissioners had merely endorsed one theory of a subtle, invisible fluid over another. One could not see, isolate, or measure this imaginative faculty—though the mesmeric fluid had apparently been debunked, the commissioners were left with another troubling question: what *was* imagination?[23] This conclusion was, in some ways, just as problematic, and polarizing, as mesmerism itself. The commissioners partly recognized this in their own conclusion. They knew that they could not attribute to imagination alone the mesmeric effects because imagination was not understood well enough, so they made it the secondary cause for these sensations, after benign physical interactions between practitioner and patient. This mere technicality is not, however, meant to undermine the significance of imagination in this conclusion. The notion of the imagination was not new at this time; Diderot had named it "one of the 'three branches of the human mind, along with memory and reason,'"[24] and it was already widely agreed that the imagination could affect the body.[25] The commissioners, however, were making new claims, insisting that the imagination could "not only imprint itself upon the body, but that it could hijack the senses, redirecting them inward."[26]

This new power attributed to the faculty of imagination threatened the prevailing notion of sensibility as the foundation of empirical philosophy. Suddenly, the senses could not be entirely

[21] Sutton, "Electric Medicine and Mesmerism", 389.
[22] Ibid., 392.
[23] Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science", 137.
[24] Ibid., 130.
[25] Ibid., 134.
[26] Ibid., 135.

trusted because the knowledge they provided was susceptible to the imagination's corrupting influence. Mesmerism, insofar as it was a system entirely based upon empirical perceptions, was continuous with its contemporary empirical philosophical theories. The problem of mesmerism actually forced the commissioners to question the standard by which they themselves as natural philosophers measured and understood the world.[27] By "[developing] a theory of how one could have feelings that were not responsive to the outside world,"[28] they placed sensation at a remove from the actual, via the mediating principle of imagination. The danger was that imagination would "lead the mind deep into itself, away from the sensory channels that opened it to its surroundings,"[29] which was feared to have the potential to upset not only academic philosophical institutions, but also the entire social order.

"The commissioners," Riskin writes, "saw sensibility as the basis for moral feeling and community;"[30] thus anything that could distort this relationship between an individual's senses and the external world was very dangerous. Based on the conclusion of the investigation, mesmerism had this potential, and not only were some individuals being led astray by Mesmer's quackery, but countless in fact were—mesmerism was all the rage, and people flocked to Mesmer from all over France. Even more troubling was the way in which mesmeric effects affected not only individuals, but also groups of people en masse: mesmeric effects were seen to be even more pronounced in crowds of people. The possibility that large portions of the population could suddenly be swayed and corrupted by such a prevalent, intensely popular influence was a huge fear for both academic and political institutions.[31] Lavoisier himself saw enormous destructive potential in the faculty of imagination as "the original source of 'revolts' and 'seditions',"[32] thus threatening political stability. This did not go unnoticed by the French government, which found the prevalence of mesmerism particularly troubling because it was "linked with ideas of democracy, harmony, and the production of a new physical and moral world."[33]

The implications of the mesmerism investigation revealed tensions not only in the social and political order, but also in the way empirical natural philosophy was understood and conducted. In their investigation, the commissioners saw themselves as representing rational, experimental philosophy in the face of what they understood to be irrational, superstitious pseudo-science. However, their own experimental study of mesmerism was in many ways disputable, and it highlighted the insecurities and contradictions inherent in the philosophical method that they themselves practiced.

The first way that the mesmerism investigation highlighted tensions within the empirical study of nature manifested itself as dissention among the commissioners themselves. Though the primary study was designed, by Lavoisier, with the intention of isolating the variables involved in the mesmerism experience, the naturalist de Jussieu took issue with this distortion of Mesmer's method. Emerging from the naturalist tradition, de Jussieu "argued that it was important to study animal magnetism in the setting in which it was used, to observe the patients in the treatment

---

[27] Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science", 120.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 131.
[30] Ibid., 133.
[31] Ibid., 140.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Malcolm Ashmore, Steven D. Brown and Katie MacMillan, "Lost in the Mall with Mesmer and Wundt: Demarcations and Demonstrations in the Psychologies," *Science, Technology and Human Values* 30, 1 (2005), 94.

rooms, and to learn exactly how the treatments were used."[34] De Jussieu had spotted a serious flaw in Lavoisier's method: as Ashmore, Brown and MacMillan argue, the attempt to "purify the social relation between healer and healee" in a therapy that is "essentially interpersonal" will of course result in the phenomenon's non-manifestation.[35] This, however, does not disprove the phenomenon; rather, it renders the experiment meaningless.[36] Here what is revealed is the problem of experimental method. Lavoisier and his supporters within the commission operated upon the assumption that to study a phenomenon rationally and empirically, all factors involved must be isolated, controlled, and manipulated individually. What scholars Ashmore, Brown and MacMillan have since remarked upon, and what de Jussieu picked up on at the time, was that this approach does not work for every situation being analyzed; there is more than one way to conduct an objective experiment. De Jussieu's understanding of the importance of a more nuanced, holistic, observational empiricism, however, was ignored, and the study continued under the direction of Lavoisier.

The second way that insecurities in the foundation of empirical philosophy were revealed was in the way that the study was shaped and altered by the assumptions that the commissioners themselves brought with them into the experiment. The first thing the commissioners did in their investigation was to submit themselves as experimental subjects to the mesmeric therapy. This was controversial on two accounts. The first problem was that all of the commissioners were healthy individuals. According to Mesmer, the magnetic fluid induces physical sensations only in patients suffering a magnetic imbalance; that is to say, healthy people do not feel it. When most of the commissioners experienced no mesmeric effects, however, they not only used this as evidence for the inefficacy of Mesmer's therapy, but they also continued to propagate this problem in their experiment by selecting predominantly healthy subjects for the remainder of their trials.[37] Thus the commissioners, in their predisposition towards dismissing mesmerism, overlooked, perhaps deliberately, a crucial aspect of Mesmer's treatment.

The commissioners also "adopted a policy of deliberate insensibility"[38] while receiving the mesmeric treatment. This tactic was explicitly stated in their method, and was found to be controversial by those on both sides of the mesmerism debate. While they were receiving the magnetic fluid from a mesmeric practitioner, the commissioners deliberately did not focus their attention on their physical sensations. They supported this practice by insisting "animal magnetism, if real, should forcibly 'fix their attention' for them."[39] Besides inducing stomach pain in one commissioner, which was quickly rationalized as being caused by something else, the commissioners did not feel any effects of the mesmeric fluid. What emerges in the close examination of the mesmerism investigation is the way in which the commissioners designed and executed their experiments with a particular expected result already in mind. Though they claimed to value high standards of objectivity and good, empirical inquiry, they conducted their investigation based on the belief that imagination must be responsible for mesmeric effects. It is impossible to say whether the commissioners would have had different experiences whether they had been, firstly, 'unbalanced' and in need of treatment, and secondly, if they had allowed themselves to notice any physical sensations. However, the ways in which these institutional

[34] Ashmore, Brown and MacMillan, "Lost in the Mall with Mesmer and Wundt", 94-95.
[35] Ibid., 95.
[36] Ibid., 96.
[37] Ashmore, Brown and MacMillan, "Lost in the Mall with Mesmer and Wundt", 95.
[38] Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science", 133.
[39] Ibid., 133.

academicians dismissed the possibility of mesmerism's credibility reveals the tensions between the notion of objectivity that was exalted by natural philosophical institutions, and the way that experimental philosophy was actually being conducted in this period.

The mesmerism investigation also revealed the embeddedness of this period's natural philosophy within the social and political ideologies of its time. Prejudice against the lower classes was made particularly apparent in the way that the commissioners perceived, and made use of, their poorer research subjects. In the apparently 'randomly selected' trials, groups of individuals were organized by class and then incorporated into a mesmerism experiment, whether by receiving a treatment or a placebo, as explained above. Despite the little to no evidence that the commissioners had to support this claim, they concluded that lower-class citizens were more prone to experiencing the effects of mesmerism, attributing this to the fact that they were easier to dupe than their higher-class counterparts.[40] Anytime a lower-class individual had a positive experience with mesmerism, potentially adding credibility to the case for mesmerism's legitimacy, this result was dismissed as being unreliable because poor individuals were more easily swayed by the imagination's corrupting influence and thus could be easily made to "believe anything."[41] In the same way, mesmerism was considered particularly suspect due to its overwhelming popularity with the female population; clearly some form of deception had enraptured the feeble female mind, and it was up to the rational male commissioners to debunk this deception once and for all. There was no empirical evidence to support the commissioners' claims about the nature of women and lower-class individuals; these ideas simply belonged to the prevalent, prejudiced assumptions of the period's social order, and they greatly informed the commission's supposedly objective natural philosophical investigation and conclusions.

The mesmerism investigation illuminated the fault lines inherent in not only the empirical natural philosophy of the late 18th century, but also in its social and political structures. Mesmer's theory forced academic institutions such as the Royal Society of Medicine, and the Academy of Sciences and the Faculty of Medicine to undermine the absolute priority they had given to the principle of sensibility by granting the imaginative faculty more power. In the way that imagination was both thought about and used in this investigation, inconsistencies between the ways natural philosophy was supposedly conducted and how it was actually carried out were revealed. Furthermore, this new conception of the imagination exposed insecurities deeply felt by philosophical and political institutions about their position with respect to the masses. Thus, it was mesmerism's challenge to the academic and political institutions of the period that revealed the inconsistency and insecurity in their foundations. This was perceived to be a real threat, and as such, it had to be discredited. The debunking of mesmerism, however, did nothing to hinder its prevalence; if anything, mesmerism's condemnation spurred on its popularity.[42] Mesmerism would ultimately fade away within the next century, but it significance lies not only in its revealing of the inherent vulnerability of political and natural philosophical institutions, but also in its illumination of the feedback relationship between the sciences and the social world.

[40] Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science", 134.
[41] Ashmore, Brown and MacMillan, "Lost in the Mall with Mesmer and Wundt", 95.
[42] Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science", 141.

Bibliography

Ashmore, Malcom, Steven D. Brown and Katie MacMillan. "Lost in the Mall with Mesmer and Wundt: Demarcations and Demonstrations in the Psychologies." *Science, Technology and Human Values* 30, 1 (2005): pp. 76-110. Sage Publications Inc. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1558014

Bivins, Roberta. *Alternative Medicine? A History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Mesmer, Franz Anton. *Mesmerism: The Discovery of Animal Magnetism.* Translated by Joseph Bouleur. Sequim WA: Holmes Publishing Group LLC, 1998.

Riskin, Jessica. "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science." In *The Sixth Sense Reader,* edited by David Howes, Oxford: Berg, 2009.

Sutton, Geoffrey. "Electric Medicine and Mesmerism." *Isis* 72, 3 (1981): 375-392. The University of Chicago Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/230256