

# A SKEPTIC'S GUIDE TO HYPNOSIS

**BY** BRAD DEFAULT

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# FOREWARD

Hello and welcome. The book you're reading deserves some explanation because I feel it needs to be understood within the context of why it was made in the first place.

First, in the event that you should find this completely divorced from all context, an introduction. My real name is Dan Olson, I am an online documentarian whose work revolves around stories, first in their use as fiction, entertainment, and culture, and second in their use as social mechanisms of myth, control, and politics.

I would like, second, to apologize for this book. This was, first and foremost, a writing exercise for a video on the subject of content mills. It was written extremely quickly under tight constraints and has suffered all the predictable consequences of that.

The constraints are: write 25,000 words on the subject in 25 days for a little under \$250, which replicates the constraints ghost writers churning out content spam are placed under. This works out to about \$3 per hour. A core limitation, of course, is that I'm not actually being paid \$250, I am merely tracking hours as though I were, and have produced this otherwise under my own motivation and approval.

While I have tried for accuracy, a scant 20 hours of research underpins this work, which is ultimately not enough. The work is thin and repetitive in order to meet word count, quotes are used far more aggressively than appropriate in order to minimize work, and while I'm proud of much of what I did manage to write, at least 1/3rd of the book is pure garbage and another 1/3rd needs to be worked over with a red felt pen and a tire iron.

A particular weakness that I am aware of falls in the early professional history of Anton Mesmer and his relationship with Fr. Maximilian Hell. What is clear is that Fr. Hell (principally an astronomer, and best remembered for his work in that field, but also a physician) had an interest in using magnets as a curative, he had an encounter with Anton Mesmer where they discussed this or Mesmer observed it, and he ultimately became one of Mesmer's most vocal critics in Vienna. What's not clear to me is when, exactly, the first two of those events happened. Various sources placed them as early as 1766 and as late as 1774, either years before Mesmer began treating Francisca Österlin or shortly afterwards, and I just did not have the time needed to sort out which sources were the most authoritative.

On the whole while I don't consider the book to be negligent or fraudulent (it's already more accurate than many casual write-ups on the various subjects) I would in no way hold it up as authoritative, definitive, or even conclusively accurate. It is still a very casual overview of the subjects and history written very hastily by someone learning on-the-fly without the aid of an editor and is no doubt full of proud nails that would be caught and hammered down by a better process.

The book is published under the name Brad Default in order to pair with its utterly fraudulent companion "Curing Epilepsy With Self-Hypnosis" which is the other component of the larger video project that this was created as a part of.

-Dan Olson, 2022

# INTRODUCTION

This book represents an odd journey on my part. I came into it not un-skeptical of hypnosis, in my work as a YouTube documentarian I often come across various flavours of crank who style themselves as hypnotherapists while peddling some form of snake oil or another. That said it was my default position that hypnosis was real, that there's something there that happens, and the whole market of hypnotherapy was over-prescription of the process or mis-identification of the therapeutic elements.

A substantial number of quack cures are at least mildly therapeutic. Sort of. There is a sleight of hand at play, though I will admit that many practitioners of various woo remedies are performing this sleight of hand by reflex rather than as a conscious effort to disguise their quackery.

Reiki is the “art” of realigning the body’s energy flow: the subject either lays down or reclines and the practitioner uses their hands to manipulate the flow of energy through the body, either by direct contact or by merely manipulating the aura above the skin in a no-contact method. Since the subject being tense, uncomfortable, irritated, or distracted will interfere with attempts to realign their energy, aggravating the problem and making the practitioner’s job harder than necessary, it is common practice to perform the therapy in a quiet, comfortable room free of excess distractions. Maybe the practitioner plays a soundtrack of gentle rain or the sounds of a forest or the ambiance of a quiet beach. The lights almost certainly get dimmed, and the temperature should be just right so that the subject feels comfortable in a light robe.

The practitioner goes to work, waving their hands, maybe lightly touching the skin.

“So was there any reason you wanted to see me today?”

“Oh, I’m just really stressed about work, there’s a big project looming and progress just isn’t moving forward nearly as fast as it needs to.”

“That does sound stressful.”

“You know how it goes, it’s gotten so bad that I get an email and just avoid even opening it, which is only making things worse.”

“Oh yeah, we’ve all been there!”

Forty-five minutes later the subject leaves feeling refreshed, centered, relaxed, and ready to face their problems. Their energy has been realigned!

Well, no.

They took an hour off from life, checked out for a bit, sat back in a warm, dim room, and vented about their problems to a sympathetic ear. Their energy wasn’t realigned, they just relaxed, and enjoyed all the very real benefits of relaxation.

This is the spine of a vast industry of quacks, grifters, and salespeople: finding a way to sell you relaxation while promising something you know relaxation can’t actually do.

Because you already know that relaxation is good for you, that venting about your problems makes you feel better, and that getting away from your problems for a bit is nice. But you also know that those don’t fix your problems.

If your problems are relatively simple, if you’ve got a task you’re more than competent at doing but have been putting off because you’re too stressed to think about it, then relieving some stress is probably all you really need.

If your problems are physical and external to your agency, if they’re medical or environmental, then checking out mentally



for a bit won't change that (even if it's still nice and good to do).

So this is the space that I was inclined to believe hypnotherapy largely occupied.

Not to spoil the plot in the introduction, but I was not entirely wrong in that belief. A huge swath of hypnosis as it is practiced in the real world, a massive volume of what is called hypnosis, is exactly this kind of quackery. But, and I do want to stress this, that's not the whole story. The tale of hypnosis is a weird one. And more than a little of it was enlightening, fascinating, shocking, and occasionally angering. Franz Mesmer will be a main character for a lot of the story. Sigmund Freud shows up at one point, and if you didn't already believe he was a bastard then maybe this will change your mind. Penn & Teller make a cameo.

First the book will try to outline the current understanding of hypnosis, what it really is, and delineate between multiple applications of the word and the phenomena that are being described. Next comes a short chronological history of the development of the art and science of hypnosis from the industrial revolution up until the story gets boring in the 20th century. Following this, a discussion of theatrical hypnosis in more depth, and then a look at the role of pop-culture, the ways in which hypnosis is depicted, and how that interacts with hypnosis as it is practiced.

After pop-culture we discuss the actual therapeutic applications of hypnosis and its limitations, following which the final chapters will focus on different degrees of fraud, grift, and quackery.

I must also apologize a bit for the rather odd construction of this book, and the somewhat haphazard flow. It was written rather hastily under some unique constraints without the guiding hand of an editor, and for much of it I spent too much

time reading the works of 19th century authors and, as often happens, drift into their written affect, so I hope the dear reader will forgive the frailty of my flesh in these regards.

# WHAT IS HYPNOSIS?

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Dictionary.com defines hypnosis as “an artificially induced trance state resembling sleep, characterized by heightened susceptibility to suggestion.”

The word was coined in the 1840s by James Braid, a Scottish surgeon, who became interested in the underlying mechanism of a phenomenon that, at the time, was known as Animal Magnetism. Beginning half a century earlier with the Swiss physician Franz Anton Mesmer, Animal Magnetists, or Mesmerists, believed that a universal magnetic force connected all living things via the medium of “magnetic fluid” which the magnetist projected and manipulated in theatrical rituals.

After attending a stage show where a magnetist demonstrated his powers and examining the body of the mesmerized participant Braid became convinced that regardless of the fanciful claims of the magnetists, which were almost certainly false, there was some actual *thing* happening underneath. To this end Braid began experimenting with the method, whittling away at the theatrics until he exposed the bare metal.

“I now stated that I considered the experiments fully proved my theory; and expressed my entire conviction that the phenomena of mesmerism were to be accounted for on the principle of a derangement of the state of the cerebrospinal centres, and of the circulatory, and respiratory, and muscular systems, induced, as I have explained, by a fixed stare, absolute

repose of body, fixed attention, and suppressed respiration, concomitant with that fixity of attention. That the whole depended on the physical and psychical condition of the patient, arising from the causes referred to, and not it all on the volition, or passes of the operator, throwing out a magnetic fluid, or exciting into activity some mystical universal fluid medium. I farther added, that having thus produced the primary phenomena, I had no doubt but the others would follow as a matter of course, time being allowed for their gradual and successive development. “

Braid, *Neurypnology*, 1843

In the exploration of the phenomenon Braid considered this discovery to be sufficient a break in the continuity of theory such as to warrant a complete break in the vocabulary of the subject. To this end he coined a new word, “neurypnosis,” from the Greek words neuron, hypnos, and logos, which respectively mean nerve, sleep, and discourse. This was the truncated form of the full phenomenon neuro-hypnosis, a truncation of two letters, o and h, which Braid considered the least he could do to make the word shorter and less cumbersome.

“Neurypnology is derived from the Greek words neuron, nerve; hypnos, sleep; logos, a discourse [Greek letters in original - DM]; and means the rationale, or doctrine of nervous sleep, which I define to be, "a peculiar condition of the nervous system, into which it can be thrown by artificial contrivance:" or thus, "a peculiar condition of the nervous system, induced by a fixed and abstracted attention of the mental and visual eye, on one object, not of an exciting nature.

[...]

I regret, as many of my readers may do, the inconvenient length of the name; but, as most of our professional terms, and nearly all those of a doctrinal meaning, have a Greek origin, I considered it most in accordance with good taste, not to deviate from an established usage. To obviate this in some degree, I have struck out two letters from the original orthography, which was Neuro-Hypnology. “

Braid, *Neurypnology*, 1843

Braid aimed for neurypnology to be a new and serious line of inquiry into observable, interesting phenomena.

Today if you see a hypnotist it likely resembles the following: twenty volunteers go up on stage, a mix of individuals from all walks of life, the hypnotist tests them, first as a large group and gradually in smaller clusters than as individuals, and they are winnowed down to three subjects who then perform comical, suggestive, or embarrassing acts for the audience. One loses the capacity to speak and can only quack like a duck, another begins to undress whenever she hears the word “rutabaga” (but is always stopped before any nipple shows), and the third, a six-foot-two lumberjack, pantomimes a pole dance.

Alternately you attend a hypnotherapist, the office decorated with motifs of succulents, lotus flowers, and water, and after a bit of conversational prep they begin working through an induction script.

“Will you just take a good long deep breath and close your eyes. Now relax the muscles around your eyes to the point where those eye muscles won’t work and when you’re sure they won’t work, test them and make sure they won’t work... [Subject opens their eyes.] No, you’re making sure they will work. Relax them to the point where they will not work and when you’re sure they won’t work, test them. Test them hard. Get

complete relaxation in those muscles around the eyes... [Client now exhibits eyelid catalepsy.] Now let that feeling of relaxation go right down to your toes... In just a moment we're going to do this again and when we do it the second time you're going to be able to relax ten times as much as you're relaxed already.

“Now open your eyes. Close your eyes. Completely relax -let yourself be covered with a blanket of relaxation. Now the third time we do it you'll be able to double the relaxation which you have. Open your eyes -now relax. I'm now going to lift your hand and drop it and if you've followed orders up to this point that hand will be just as limp as a dishrag and will just plop into your lap... No, let me lift it -don't you lift it- let it be heavy -that's good- but let's open and close the eyes again and double that relaxation and send it right down to your toes. Let that hand be as heavy as lead... You'll feel it when you've got the real relaxation... Now you've got it. You could feel that, couldn't you?  
(Patient: Yes.)”

“That's complete physical relaxation, but I want to show you how you can get mental relaxation as well as physical, so I'm going to ask you to start counting -when I tell you to- from a hundred backwards. Each time you say a number, double your relaxation, and by the time you get down to ninety-eight you'll be so relaxed there won't be any more numbers... Start with the idea of making that happen and watch it happen. Count out loud please. (Patient: One hundred.) Double your relaxation and watch the numbers start disappearing. (Ninety-nine.) Watch the numbers start disappearing. (Ninety-eight.) Now they'll be gone... Make it happen. You've got to do it, I can't do it. Make them disappear, dispel them, make them vanish. Are they all gone? [The subject says “yes” but on

questioning and testing Elman finds that he is simply “too darn tired” to continue.]”

“So make those numbers completely disappear... Banish them... Are they gone? (No.) Make them disappear. I’m going to lift your hand and drop it, and when I do, the rest of those numbers will drop out. Want them to drop out and watch them go... Gone? (Yes.)”

Elman, Hypnotherapy, 1964

Hypnosis, as a phenomenon, has been observed in humans since prehistory, though this definition does require some malleability and back-filling of definitions. Human susceptibility to trance states has a long history across continents and cultures as a religious practice, a metaphysical exercise, or a medical tool. Modern hypnosis, with its theatrical elements and pop-culture connections, hinges on this same root phenomenon: the trance.

Despite the long history of hypnosis, we still aren’t entirely sure what hypnosis physically is or why it happens.

It is, at once, a sort of dissociative state and a form of hyper-focus, a relaxed frame of mind where the individual gives themselves permission to step outside themselves, outside the confines and limitations and inhibitions of their outer shell, their mask self, and indulge in practices such as fantasy, exhibition, or extreme honesty.

Consistent in modern hypnosis is a framework of suggestibility, a state where the individual can be guided, instructed, and positioned merely by the words of the hypnotist, the idea that the participants go up on stage and the hypnotist is able to make them do stuff.

This is where the debate starts.

On one hand is a belief that the hypnotic state, the trance, is indeed a truly altered state of mind, similar to drugs or alcohol, not merely a frame of mind but a situation where neurons fire differently. When you are drunk the impairment is imposed, there is a chemical cause and a physical effect. Some assert that this is likewise the case for hypnosis, that the brain is physically put into an altered state, where the suggestibility and hyperfocus, the trance, is an imposed physiological phenomenon. This is the “state theory of hypnosis.”

On the other, the “non-state theory of hypnosis,” is a framework that starts from suggestibility and the natural malleability of human emotions and focus, and simply extends that out to the extremes. All humans are susceptible to trance-like states of one kind or another, whether daydreaming, fatigued, deeply bored, or highly engaged in an intense task. Likewise all humans have a selection of persona that they utilize in contextual social scenarios. The words we pick and choose are different around our parents or young children than around our rowdy friends. The ways we act, the tones of voice and our poise, are different when we’re engaging in picking bread at the grocery versus when we’re engaging in intimate acts in the bedroom.

Extrapolated to its extreme is the suggestion that hypnosis is ultimately type of natural human performance, a social frame of mind where the participant is relaxed, focused, and willing to adopt whatever social poise is required to perform their role, that the act of being hypnotized forms a gate of permission that allows the subject to comfortably enter the extremes of their own disinhibited inclinations.

Under this framework the participants on stage are not *altered* by the instructions of the hypnotist, but are merely psyched up, convinced that they are now safe to behave in extremes. For stage hypnosis in particular it’s a quietly negotiated trust. The hypnotist is convincing the participants



that they have convinced the audience to believe that what follows is, in some form or another, induced, that it is the “fault” of the hypnotist, but that it is simultaneously *safe*, that the hypnotist can be trusted. The reason the hypnotist brings up so many subjects and then winnows them down is because out of the room full of people there are only a few who will be truly willing to take that offer, and the skill of the hypnotist is in identifying who those people are.

Of course the stage hypnotist is aided by several steps of self-selection.

First, the subjects (and audience) all chose to come to see a hypnotist in the first place. Second, they volunteered to go up on stage. In taking these steps the volunteers have already signaled that, at the very least, they are open to the *concept* of being hypnotized, a critical element of receptiveness to the process.

In media this negotiating process is called “buy in,” it’s the process where the audience accepts various propositions across a wide range of extremes, from “these actors are playing different people” to “wizards are real” to “Kevin Spacy has felt a human emotion”. This has in the past commonly been framed as “suspension of disbelief” but that’s fallen by the wayside in recent years based on the logic that *belief* and *acceptance* are not entirely the same thing. It is possible to *accept* that wizards and dragons and unicorns are real in the context of a fictional work that was created by actually-real humans without *believing* that wizards are real.

Along these lines several scholars have suggested that hypnosis is, likewise, entirely fabricated, or rather that hypnosis isn’t a unique, distinct, consistent state of mind, but a constructed post-hoc definition of outcomes, that any scenario that produces results that resemble the expected outcomes of hypnosis are afterwards *described* as hypnosis

regardless of what was actually happening, biologically and psychologically, in the subject.

This may, in fact, be the correct answer, or perhaps somewhere along the road to the correct answer which may well be that hypnosis isn't a singular thing, but a cloud of states and outcomes that is contextually malleable. In other words what hypnosis *is* is in no small part dictated by what the context requires hypnosis to *do*.

In other words there is likely not a singular hypnosis, but a collection of various methods, processes, and mental states where the results meet the criteria of what we call hypnosis. This would explain not only the wide variety of methods that are used to achieve hypnosis, but disagreement over what the ideal traits for predisposition to hypnotic states are, disagreements over the role of dissociation, and disagreements over whether the result is a true mental state or merely a mental frame. A depersonalized, dissociated state produces similar outcomes to a hyperfocused, compliant frame, and thus both are labeled hypnosis.

Of course many people outright dismiss hypnosis as a thing entirely, insisting that it's all an outright hoax, and their motivations for making this claim aren't without justification. There's a lot of conflicting, sometimes incoherent, information out there, people claiming that hypnosis is the best way to quit smoking or rewire your eating habits, incredulous claims about hypnotic regression, and of course famous tales of hypnosis being used to unlock the truth about alien abductions.

This is the space where the waters are muddied by the presence of a strain of pop-culture-influenced "hypnosis" that is pure woo, non-functional nonsense playing off the participants expectation of what hypnosis is capable of doing, where the participants, wanting to believe in the promises of some guru, perform the expected behavior in an attempt at

manifesting some impossible desired outcome, such as extreme weight loss, healing serious disease, or becoming a savant at day trading penny stocks.

Much of this is highly sensational, promoted as the key that will unlock the door to an exceptional life, confirming some supernatural phenomenon like telekinesis, mind-reading, speaking with ghosts, or the verification of alien life.

This form of woo-hypnosis is often self-applied, or administered via audio recording. It's able to succeed because the exact bounds of what hypnosis even is, what it feels like, what the results should be, and the ways in which it operates are so vague and contested that it becomes, effectively, an unfalsifiable claim. If no one really knows what hypnosis actually is, and no one can agree on what states truly qualify as hypnotic, then who is to say that getting a bit zoned out while listening to an audio book *isn't* a hypnotic state?

The irony is that that is likely closer to the truth, that hypnosis is a far more mundane state of mind, basically just being particularly zoned out, that is in turn amplified by the expectations of the recipient, who is primed to some level of performance by the administrator, who might even be themselves.

The ultimate reality of hypnosis is that it exists in a space between grandiose claims and marginal practical utility. Much of the therapeutic benefit of hypnosis, to the degree that such exists, is merely a sensationalist packaging of meditative relaxation techniques. While meditation is itself also frequently the subject of absurd claims, being imposed with ties to the supernatural, these tend to be easier to parse fact from fiction as the benefits of relaxation as an abstract concept are much more intuitively understood by people in general.

Put another way, because people already have their own instinctive meditative practices, be they quiet solo hobbies, thinking in the shower, or cuddling with loved ones, the benefits of enjoying some peace and quiet in a relaxed atmosphere and comfortable environment are something that most people have personal experience with, making the claim that meditation offers some cosmic benefits beyond mindfulness and decompression easier to separate out.

So, then, this is the question. When you stand in the shower and achieve a zen frame of mind, unburdened by anxiety or calculation, just enjoying the white noise and the sensation of the warm water, a “no thoughts, just vibes” state of being, and you feel that tingle down your back as your muscles truly relax, is that meaningfully different from hypnosis?

Well, yes and no.

As there are (almost certainly) different *kinds* of hypnosis, there are different *degrees* of hypnosis, and this is at the very least observable.

The process of deep hypnosis requires a cocktail of cooperating elements: a hypnotist who is competent at building the needed set and setting, an appropriate scene, and a willing participant who is also meaningfully susceptible to suggestion. Deep hypnosis is in effect the process of guiding a subject into the state of mind at the cusp of sleep (and, indeed, subjects falling asleep entirely is common in therapeutic hypnosis). In this natural state, which most people experience organically at one point or another in their life, the subject is still alert enough to respond to stimulus, but otherwise mentally checked out. A common organic version of this would be a deep daydream or nodding off on the train, the depth where you're not so asleep that you miss your stop, but deep enough that your perception of time or body shut down, perhaps even in a way that you are somewhat aware of it happening.

In this state the subject is at their most suggestible.

In this state of suggestibility the subject is acutely receptive to new ideas, new ways of thinking, new mental frameworks, and new beliefs. We'll talk about this more in chapter 4, but the root of it is that this is not a means for wholly novel thoughts to be implanted into a subject, but for existing thoughts to be restructured. Using the example of hypnotists who run stop-smoking seminars, the logic is this: you may, and probably do, already consider that smoking is bad for you, that it's bad for the people around you, that it's expensive, and that it's not worth continuing. In fact you almost certainly consider at least one or two of these to be true, given that you've sought out a hypnotist to help you stop smoking. But you are having trouble acting on those beliefs because the priority of the physical sensations of smoking ultimately take priority over the belief that you maybe shouldn't keep smoking.

The idea is that in a hypnotic state, a high-suggestibility state, it's better possible for those priorities to be rearranged, for the existing *understanding* that smoking is harmful to be converted into a *belief* that drives actions.

This is where a new complication is introduced into the question of what is hypnosis: does hypnosis actually work?

The existence of various hypnotic states is factual, even if there's disagreement about what's truly happening in the brain in those moments, but where skepticism rightly enters the picture in full force is the derivative question of whether or not the manipulation of that hypnotic state has meaningful impact, and why.

This taps into deeper questions about how and why people believe what they do, why do people act on certain beliefs but not others, how are motivations formed and organized,

why do humans have so much compartmentalized dissonance between truths and behaviors.

While there's disagreement over what hypnosis truly is, there's little disagreement over what it isn't. Hypnosis isn't mind control.

In examining various hypnotic practitioners who promise various measurable outcomes from their hypnosis the results seem to indicate that the results are indeed relevant above placebo, but far below the lofty claims made.

This, then, indicates that skepticism is well-warranted, and untangling this is the purpose of this book.

The simplest explanation for the disconnect is that many, many, many practitioners are promising things that hypnosis is simply not capable of doing, that they as practitioners are incapable of delivering, or some synthesis of the two.

It is not that hypnosis is fake, that there is nothing there worth considering, but that the lack of rigor, qualifications, and study on the subject have left a wide open field to be filled to overflowing with frauds making grandiose claims that are wildly disconnected from reality, spiritualists and gurus who use hypnosis as an exotic pseudo-scientific flavoring of their otherwise banal woo. Indeed, looking at the field, it's difficult to not come to the conclusion that the field is principally composed of such cranks, that they form the baseline for the vast majority of material that is available, and that practitioners who approach hypnosis from a practical, grounded, realistic, results-oriented perspective, unburdened by the trappings of new-age wankery, are a scant minority, and even then are still burdened by an over-prescription of value.

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF HYPNOSIS

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As a natural physical phenomenon hypnosis and hypnotic trances have been known about to some degree or another by humans since pre-history. Trance states, meditative states, hyperfocus, catalepsy, and other features of hypnosis have formed important elements of creative and spiritual practices throughout the ages. The use of rhythmic chanting, a common technique for inducing hypnosis, is a common element in religions, formal and folk, the world over.

Of particular interest is the history of sleep temples and healing rituals, ancient practices where patients would come to a priest-physician in search of relief for some physical, spiritual, or mental ailment and would be treated with what could be considered a form of hypnotic induction: a relaxed, comfortable posture, chanting, breathing rituals, the application of massage, and possibly the administration of hallucinogens or narcotics. The patient, in a trance-like state, is relieved (however temporarily) of pain via the anesthetic properties of hypnosis. They are, likewise, receptive to suggestion and ideas, spiritual revelations, personal breakthroughs, and a re-structuring of priorities and perspectives.

The modern conceptualization of hypnosis begins in the early 1500s with a Swiss alchemist named Paracelsus.

A wealthy dilettante, Paracelsus traveled throughout Europe and India investigating the local traditions of physicians, healers, and mystics, from which he synthesized a quasi-formal practice utilizing rituals, alchemy (drugs), astrology, and magnetism.

The belief that magnets and magnetized objects can rearrange either some metaphysical element of the human spirit or realign some physical element in disarray and thus promote both healing and spiritual unity is one that has existed on the fringes of belief for thousands of years, and persists with us to this day.

Paracelsus was not exceptionally influential, however his writings and practices would form the basis for several theories and practitioners throughout the 1600s, though most of these, such as Rober Fludd and William Maxwell, were principally concerned with magnetism as the principal area of interest, hypothesizing that the elements of Paracelsus' work that would be described as hypnotism today were principally rooted in his use of magnetism.

In the late 1700s a German priest and exorcist named John Joseph Gassner rose to popularity in Europe with his traveling show, a precursor to 19th and 20th century faith healer revival circuits, where he would utilize techniques very similar to modern day stage hypnotists to induce a compliant, albeit significantly performative, hypnotic state wherein he would command the devil and other evil spirits to be expelled from the subject.

During these tours in the late 1700s Gassner came to the attention of the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer.

Mesmer was born to a neither exceptionally poor nor notably wealthy family and was able to attend the University of Vienna for medicine. In 1768, at the age of 34, Mesmer married the 44 year old wealthy widow Anna Maria von Posch who would bankroll his career and provide him with access to the aristocracy who would ultimately make him a celebrity.

Mesmer was principally a magnetist, believing that all things share a common magnetic force, and that diseases were



disturbances of this field and could subsequently be cured by realignment or the redistribution of magnetic fluid. He had delivered his doctoral dissertation on the subject of the influence of the planets on this hypothetical medium in 1766, though the thought was fringe at the time and by 1775 these beliefs had become overtly controversial in the medical world.

The development of Mesmer's ideology and practice between the years of 1770 and 1778 is not particularly linear, he spent years in Vienna workshopping vocabulary and ideas, and much of this is back-filled from Mesmer's own memoir written in 1779.

After seeing Gassner's faith healing show, in particular seeing the apparent force of attraction in the fixed focus of subjects and deciding that this response was a form of magnetism he called animal magnetism (to distinguish from physical magnetism and explain away criticisms of his work, namely that the phenomenon observed didn't respond to or influence magnets and thus had no demonstrable connections to magnetism at all) he synthesized his own version based off his beliefs in common magnetic fluid. He would, years later, dub the process Animal Magnetism.

He had observed that the subjects of Gassner's exorcisms underwent convulsive episodes followed by an "awakening", a breaking of the trance, after which the subject experienced a wave of catharsis and euphoria. This then became the principal effect that Mesmer was interested in triggering, what he called a "cathartic crisis".

Despite his controversy amongst the medical community of his day, Mesmer was popular among the European aristocracy (one of his friends and patients was Wolfgang Mozart) and was, in modern parlance, a physician to the stars, the 1770s version of Doctor Oz, a trained physician who spent most of his time peddling pseudoscience and parlor tricks as

cure-alls to the rich and famous of Vienna, a vain and self-important man who craved publicity and attracted a substantial following despite the fraudulence of his claims.

One of Mesmer's most vocal critics was a Jesuit priest and astronomer, Father Maximilian Hell. Mesmer and Hell had met in the late 1760s when Mesmer observed Hell's use of magnetized loadstone plates in treating rheumatism. Original versions of Mesmer's practice included the use of magnets to realign and guide magnetic fluid before concluding that he could achieve the same results merely by rubbing his hands on the patient. However in 1775 Hell proposed that the tangible results of Mesmer's process were largely facilitated by the patient's imagination, that no magnetic principles were involved in any form, and that his flamboyant process of administering treatment, synthesized as it was from the theatrics of a faith healer and "theft" of Hell's own processes, was unscientific showmanship that did little but obscure whatever legitimate therapeutic techniques might be at work.

At this point Mesmer coins the term "animal magnetism" in order to deflect the criticism, the observable fact that whatever Mesmer was doing it did not interact with magnets in the slightest, however beyond that concession/defence he refused any calls for his process to be exposed to rigorous examination, whether it be isolating specific parts of the process or submitting to controlled conditions, preferring to operate his practice ad hoc, often for an audience.

Mesmer's fame in Vienna was rocky. Starting in 1774 he began treatment of a patient, Francisca Österlin. Österlin suffered from various maladies generalized as hysteria (i.e. "bitches be crazy"), which may have in fact been largely psychosomatic. After she did not respond to conventional treatments of the time Mesmer began experimenting on her with animal magnetism, to which she responded, by Mesmer's account, miraculously.

This gave Mesmer the belief that he had developed something truly remarkable, and he began doggedly pursuing a high profile patient.

Maria Theresia Paradis was an aristocratic vocalist, pianist, and composer who had lost most of her sight at an early age, likely to a neurological condition. A talented musician from a young age, she was a celebrity among Vienna's elite, and also something of a white whale for the city's physicians who all sought to make a name for themselves by curing her inexplicable sight loss.

In 1775 Mesmer managed to get an in with her father, the imperial secretary of the court of the empress, and through that began attempting to treat the then-sixteen-year-old Maria. Over the next eighteen months Mesmer attempted to treat her condition with a variety of techniques that, in retrospect, largely amounted to experiments in what would become mesmerism. He claimed success in late 1776 when Maria regained substantial sightedness, only to return home and almost immediately decline in condition.

The whole affair was somewhat scandalous, the good doctor spending so much time alone with the young woman at his wife's estate, and then to have his cure so immediately fail?

The hook in this story, though, is that Paradis very much did not like Mesmer. Having been almost wholly blind from the age of 3 she did not consider her blindness to be worth the hand-wringing that older men imposed upon her and tired of being prodded, "treated", and experimented upon. It is extremely probable that her recovery was in fact a lie purely to get Mesmer to let her go home.

In the face of mounting criticism, Mesmer opted to leave Vienna in 1777 and, after some travel, reestablished his practice in Paris in 1778 where he, once again, attracted a wealthy and influential clientele.

During the decades of administering to the wealthy Mesmer came to loathe them in a fashion, despising their proclivities, ignorance, and isolation from the world, but ultimately craving their attention, money, and the fame that came from proximity to them, which he rationalized as a means to bringing the healing power of Mesmerism to everyone regardless of social class.

To this end Mesmer attempted to create egalitarian versions of his practice that were freely available to all, however the efficacy of these efforts was functionally zero, owing to his misplaced understanding of what it was he was actually doing.

Under the belief that he was manipulating magnetic fluids, discounting the hypnotic trance as a byproduct of the process, he postulated that one could create a beacon of properly aligned magnetism which anyone could then align themselves to. To facilitate this free medical care he Mesmerized the tree in front of his office so that anyone who came by could self-administer Mesmeric therapy by utilizing the tree's correctly aligned magnetic fluids.

As a later addition to his practice Mesmer constructed several devices called Mesmer's baquet (baquet is the French word for a wash basin), an oak tub about the size of a small bath, filled with Mesmerized water, powdered glass, and iron filings. Key to the device (or at least considered important even if entirely non-functional in reality) were a number of rods partially immersed in the water made of various materials that patients would touch to afflicted body parts, either by mere contact or by massage. The tub would be sometimes sealed with a wooden lid with the rods protruding through it down into the water, and a later addition to the ritual saw participants connected to one another by a length of rope tied loosely about the waist in order to form a continuous loop through all members and the Mesmerized

water, the rope facilitating the flow of properly aligned magnetic fluid from the water to the patients and back.

One of these baquets was also constructed outside for anyone to use in order to self-administer Mesmeric therapy.

Inside, sessions with Mesmer's wealthy clientele were administered in a dimly lit room lined with mirrors while Mesmer himself wore a violet silk robe, because in the world of woo mystical medicine nothing has changed in over two hundred years.

This setting, in addition to the very hands-on nature of Mesmer's technique, led to numerous accusations of impropriety, the perception that the whole affair was, to some degree, seductive or scandalous, though surprisingly despite the trappings history doesn't seem to indicate that Mesmer ever made the leap to full on sex cult.

As we see in modern medical woo, Mesmer's techniques relied heavily on charisma and little on rigor, making them easy to duplicate or iterate on, leading to a wave of competition from imitators. This prompted Mesmer in 1783 to form the Society of Universal Harmony, via which he sold workshops and seminars in "true" Mesmerism to an elite in-group.

Notably prior to the establishment of the Society, a schism formed between Mesmer and his protege Charles d'Eslon. D'Eslon was interested in de-mystifying Mesmer's techniques, and spent his time with Mesmer collating data about patient receptiveness to the process and attempting to quantify responses, noting that fewer than 20% of subjects were able to be meaningfully mesmerized and less than 5% would achieve the crisis response that Mesmer desired. The two clashed over Mesmer's intense egotism and refusals to alter his techniques or pursue the implications of gathered data,

and subsequently d'Eslon broke away forming his own competing branch of magnetism.

By 1784 the popular growth of Mesmerism was significant enough to attract the attention of the crown, though Mesmer wasn't exactly trying to avoid the attention, as he had already himself written the queen Marie Antoinette to suggest that the crown owed him 20,000 francs per year and an estate for the good he had done for the city.

Following this letter, and after several of her aristocratic friends raved about the benefits of Mesmerism, Marie Antoinette had a royal spokesperson reach out to both Mesmer and Mesmer's now-competitor, Charles d'Eslon.

Subsequent these exchanges Louis XVI organized a commission of scientists to investigate the theoretical basis of Mesmer's claims. This commission was chaired by American scientist and ambassador Benjamin Franklin, who agreed to take some time away from banging French MILFs to assemble a team of qualified scientists and physicians. The commission also included the chemist Antoine Lavoisier, the botanist Antoine de Jussieu, and then-obscure physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin who would a few years later, owing to the publicity of his role on the commission, convince Louis XVI to adopt Antoine Louis' swift, painless method of mechanized decapitation as a standardized form of capital punishment.

The commission's task was not to investigate the efficacy of Mesmer's technique, i.e. whether or not it had any therapeutic effects, but the claims about the mechanism by which it worked. Thus the focus was not on the ways in which patients responded but if animal magnetism and magnetic fluid were real phenomena that Mesmer was manipulating.

In controlled experiments where blindfolded subjects were either administered Mesmeric techniques, namely waving rods over their bodies and being exposed to mirrors and

Mesmerized substances, or were merely told they were being administered Mesmeric techniques, the outcomes were the same. Thus the conclusion of the commission was that any therapeutic results of the technique were the result of the “power of imagination.”

While most of the commission felt that this conclusion was sufficient to dismiss the whole thing out of hand, de Jussieu included a minority opinion wherein he proposed that the “power of imagination” may in fact have some therapeutic properties worthy of pursuit even if the majority of Mesmer’s practice and the entirety of his theoretical claims were false.

Mesmer, however, refused to separate his practice from his theories. Discredited by the royal commission and unwilling to change his ways, much of his aristocratic, socialite clientele abandoned him, and by the end of 1785 he had moved to Switzerland to recede into effective retirement with his substantial wealth.

The torch of mesmerism was carried by one of Mesmer’s other students, and member of the Society of Universal Harmony, the Marquis de Puysegur Amand-Marie-Jacques de Chastenet. He found de Jussieu’s opinion in alignment with his own observations. In working with Mesmer de Chastenet had been less interested in the cathartic crisis and more in the far more common relaxed, sleep-like state he observed in patients, a state he dubbed “artificial somnambulism.”

To this end he focused his efforts on amplifying this state, pursuing it as the goal of his version of mesmerism rather than a failure to achieve a crisis response.

However de Chastinet also retained his beliefs in animal magnetism and brought along his own additional dimensions of mysticism. He believed that it was the will of the magnetist that induced the hypnotic trance, in effect a magical power possessed by the practitioner. He proposed that in the state

of artificial somnambulism patients could perfectly perceive their entire body and accurately self-diagnose any ailment of the organs. Observing the hypnotic phenomena of spontaneous memory recall, which in reality is highly unreliable owing to the fragility of human memory and the ease with which the mind can fabricate false memories, he began to believe that patients could unlock psychic powers, gain clairvoyance, read the minds of others, recall past lives, and communicate with the dead.

Joseph-Philippe-François Deleuze, an admirer of de Chastinet and collaborator with de Jussieu at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle following the revolution, published several influential books on the subject of Animal Magnetism in the early 1800s. Deleuze was more rigorous and medical than the Marquis, describing many of the granular elements of a hypnotic trance. He advocated principally for the application of magnetism as a complimentary treatment for conditions that aesthetically mirrored the somnambulist state in some way: convulsive disorders, spasms, and seizures as the extreme opposite of somnambulism, and paralysis as the extreme expression. While this is of questionable efficacy today, it was at least somewhat constrained.

That said his philosophy was far from devoid of the supernatural. Deleuze believed that the magnetic force was an expression of willpower that transmitted from the magnetist to the patient, and as such magnetists needed to be of the highest moral fibre, and in good health, lest their magnetic fluid poison the patient. From this he reaches the obvious, if not wholly self-evident conclusion that magnetists are, in fact, the best people possible, because it would be impossible for a man of impure character to properly project the magnetic fluid. Conversely magnetism has little to no impact on people in good health (physically or spiritually), therefore the ability to be mesmerized is evidence of illness.



“As we cannot comprehend how a body can act upon another at a distance, without there being something to establish a communication between them, we suppose that a substance emanates from him who magnetizes, and is conveyed to the person magnetized, in the direction given it by the will. This substance, which sustains life in us, we call the magnetic fluid. The nature of this fluid is unknown; even its existence has not been demonstrated; but every thing occurs as if it did exist, and that warrants us in admitting it, while we are indicating the means of employing magnetism.

[...]

If the will is necessary to direct the fluid, belief is necessary to direct the fluid, belief is necessary to induce one to make a firm and steady use of the faculties he possesses. Confidence in the power we possess, makes us act without effort and without distraction. As to the rest, confidence is the only consequence of belief: it differs in this only—one believes himself to be endowed with a power, whose reality he does not doubt.

[...]

The fluid which emanates from the magnetizer, exercising a physical influence upon the patient, it follows that the magnetizer ought to be in good health. This influence exerting, in the course of time, an effect upon the moral condition of the patient, it follows that the magnetizer ought to be worthy of esteem for the uprightness of his mind, the purity of his sentiments, and the honesty of his character. The knowledge of this principle is equally important for those who magnetize, and for those who are the subjects of magnetism.

The faculty of magnetizing exists in all persons; but all do not possess it in the same degree. This difference of magnetic power in various individuals, arises from the superiority which some have over others, in moral and physical qualities. Among the moral qualities, are, confidence in one's own power, energy of will, facility in sustaining and concentrating the attention, the sentiment of benevolence which unites us to every suffering being, strength of mind enabling one to remain calm in the midst of the most alarming crises, patience which prevents uneasiness in a long and painful struggle, disinterestedness which makes one forget himself and devote himself to the being whom he attends and which banishes vanity and even curiosity. Of physical qualifications, the first is good health, the next a peculiar power, different from that which raises burthens or moves heavy bodies, and of which we recognize the existence and the degree of energy in ourselves, only by the trial we make of it.

[...]

Magnetism generally exercises no influence upon persons in health. The same man who was insensible to it in a state of good health, will experience the effects of it when ill.”

Deleuze, Practical Instructions in Animal Magnetism,  
1825

A counterpoint and contemporary of Deleuze, Jose Custodio di Faria, was the first notable magnetist to suggest that it wasn't the magnetist who was especially important, but the subject, that the magnetist does not, in fact, project a force upon the subject by the power of personal will, but aid the subject in self-induction via suggestion, that the physical manifestation of the somnambulist state has its origins entirely within the subject. From this observation di Faria

begins to question the theory of magnetic fluid, since the fluid was necessary to explain what was framed as a force transmitting from one individual to another. This begins the suggestion theory of hypnosis.

During the first half of the 19th century several physicians take note of the anesthetic qualities of the hypnotic state and experiment with the use of mesmerism in surgery, the application of which is mixed, but both surprisingly effective in the patients who were receptive to hypnosis and remarkably humane in a day when the primary anesthetic was liquor, if one was used at all. However this noteworthy application of hypnosis was limited in its spread, hampered by the contemporary continuation of supernatural mesmerism adopted by the waves of magicians, spirit mediums, seers, and myriad snake oil salesmen that surged in the early 1800s, and rendered largely irrelevant with the discovery of ether in 1846 and chloroform in 1847, general anesthetics that were far more reliable and effective than hypnoanesthesia.

The early 19th century history of hypnosis thusly follows two major branches, each with its own arms and twigs: a story of the medical arc of hypnosis, a series of generally respectable characters who held wild beliefs but nonetheless moved the understanding of hypnosis towards our modern understanding of the phenomenon, and a second story of a thousand minor charlatans utilizing magnetism and mesmerism as spectacle, superstition, and panacea.

The line between these two camps, however, is in reality quite blurry, and people who appear to follow one often have one foot in the other.

Dr. John Elliotson, a pioneer in the use of the stethoscope, the man who pinpointed pollen as the cause of hayfever, and also a phrenologist, had been experimenting with mesmeric anesthesia when he came in contact with two teenage epileptic patients, Elizabeth and Jane Okey (sometimes

printed erroneously as O'key), 17 and 15 respectively. The sisters, he found, were acutely susceptible to mesmerism and exhibited extremely deep anesthetic traits while mesmerized.

(It is worth noting, at this point, that “epileptic” in the context of 19th century medicine is an extremely broad umbrella applied liberally to just about any collection of symptoms with an apparent nervous cause).

He then, over the course of several months, began experimenting on the girls, mesmerizing them before administering various invasive (and wholly unnecessary) procedures such as injections and suturing.

Additionally he convinced himself that Elizabeth in her deepest mesmerized states possessed clairvoyant powers, and began to use her to diagnose other patients at night.

Elliotson began administering these tests as public demonstrations, charging doctors, press, celebrities, and socialites admission to the hospital operating room where he would mesmerize the girls and either demonstrate their imperviousness to pain, have them exhibit their mesmerism-unlocked psychic powers (Jane, in a trance, claimed she could see from her fingertips), or simply have them demonstrate the “transmutation of personality” as their demure social demeanor faded under the trance and they would dance, sing, tell bawdy jokes, and roast Elliotson and other attendees.

This spectacle caught the attention of Charles Dickens, who became friends with Elliotson and, it is claimed, learned the art of mesmerism from him. It also caught the ire of Elliotson's friend and contemporary, Thomas Wakley, the founding editor of the then-new medical journal *The Lancet*.

Wakley conducted a series of investigations in August of 1838 to expose and debunk Elliotson, resulting in a series of articles and a public feud that would persist well into the 40s.

Wakley's debunking of Elliotson is a bit of a mixed bag, as it appears to the outside observer that the man simply loathed Elliotson on some deeply primal level. He launched attacks on Elliotson from virtually every conceivable angle, from the scandalous impropriety of mesmerizing young women for an audience to the malpractice of performing unnecessary procedures and tests on the girls to the question of whether or not the girls were, themselves, the hoax suggesting either they were in conspiracy with Elliotson or else he was their weak-willed pawn.

The nail in the coffin of Elliotson's reputation came from a public demonstration performed by Wakley where the girls were unable to consistently identify mesmerized water from ordinary water (a test that, incidentally, proves little relevant as it was Elliotson, not Elizabeth and Jane, who claimed clairvoyance and the science of animal magnetism) and a demonstration by Elliotson where he failed to induce a trance in the girls, who then reacted with appropriate pain when pricked with needles.

Wakley seized these incidents as proof that the Okey sisters were frauds, that they had been faking all along, and Elliotson, a physician and thus by definition a gentleman, had been had over by two girls seeking fame and attention.

“The “science” of mesmerism, like the “science” of fortunetelling, will always carry on a precarious existence wherever there are clever girls, philosophic Bohemians, weak women, and weaker men, but it can no longer affront the common sense of the medical profession, or dare to show its face in the scientific societies after the late exposure.

[...]

Jane O'key appears, on a cursory examination to be but a tame copy of her sister Elizabeth is a genius in her line. This is betrayed by her dark, piercing eye, her wonderful performances, and the power which she exercises over all who have come much in contact with her.”

Thomas Wakley, Faculties of Elizabeth O'key,  
The Lancet, September 15, 1838

In the wake of Wakley's exposé Elliotson was impelled to resign from the hospital in December of 1838 following an administrative resolution banning the practice of mesmerism.

In 1841 the Scottish surgeon James Braid attended a performance of animal magnetism by the traveling showman Charles Lafontaine who had come to magnetism largely by coincidence in the 1930s via the published works of Chastinet and Deleuze. Braid was already a skeptic of the claims of magnetists and the theory of magnetic fluid owing to notable scientific literature at the time as well as the high profile resignation of Elliotson a few years earlier.

Observing the show Braid was certain that something had happened, but unsure of what.

After attending two more subsequent performances he left convinced the subject had undergone some transition from one condition to another and then back, he wholly rejected Lafontaine's insistence that magnetic agency, magnetism, or interpersonal force of any kind was at play.

“The first exhibition of the kind I ever had an opportunity of attending, was one of M. Lafontaine's *conversazione*, on the 13th November, 1841. That night I saw nothing to diminish, but rather to confirm, my previous prejudices. At the next *conversazione*, six

nights afterwards, one fact, the inability of a patient to open his eyelids, arrested my attention. I considered that to be a real phenomenon, and was anxious to discover the physiological cause of it.”

Braid, *Neurypnology*, 1843

From there Braid determined to apply rigorous experimental pressure to the process, to cut out all possible influences of showmanship, all superstition and mysticism, and work the concept down to its bare components. To this end he came independently to the same supposition that di Faria had: that the process was not a power that flowed from the operator and was imposed on the subject, but was as state the subject imposed on themselves at the guidance of the operator.

In 1843 Braid published *Neurypnology*, the rationale of nervous sleep considered in relation with animal magnetism, a book in which he sought to discard the cruft of superstition and occult from mesmerism, dismiss the pseudoscience of animal magnetism, and start the medical conversation over with the subject of neuro-hypnology, or hypnosis, "a peculiar condition of the nervous system, induced by a fixed and abstracted attention of the mental and visual eye, on one object, not of an exciting nature."

Braid demonstrated conclusively that the hypnotic state was not induced by any force or energy that emanated from the operator, but was wholly an internal phenomenon that an operator could, at best, guide a subject into, that as such it could even be self-induced after a fashion.

Braid's primary mode of induction involved straining the subject's eyes.

“Take any bright object (I generally use my lancet case) between the thumb and the fore and middle fingers of the left hand; hold it from about eight to fifteen inches from the eyes at such position above the forehead, as

may be necessary to produce the greatest possible strain upon the eyes and the eyelids, and enable the patient to maintain a steady fixed stare at the object.

The pupils will be at first contracted: they will shortly begin to dilate, and after they have done so to a considerable extent, and have assumed a wavy motion, if the fore and middle fingers of the right hand are carried from the object towards the eyes, most probably the eyelids will close involuntarily, with a vibratory motion.”

Braid, *Neurypnology*, 1843

Braid’s intention here, with the coining of the word ‘hypnosis’ was to create a clean break from the baggage-laden concepts of mesmerism and magnetism, to cleanly delineate the facts-focused science from its predecessors, but as is seemingly inevitable in science communications the hucksters and charlatans and fortune tellers simply adopted the new word as well.

If the future history of hypnosis in Europe was fraught, in America the war was already lost, the charlatans had won. Few scientific, or even nominally scientific practitioners made the move across the Atlantic, and thus America’s experience with hypnosis remained firmly rooted in mesmerism, informed by pop culture manifestations like Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* in which a mesmerist magnetizes a man in the moments before his death, unnaturally extending his consciousness for months beyond the death of his physical body.

This is where it’s worth commenting on the fundamental challenge faced by scientific hypnotists from the time of Braid to the present: hypnosis occupies a niche wherein it is just effective enough to be real, to be interesting and compelling, but is not practical enough to compete with most other therapeutic methods. Relatively few people are susceptible



enough to hypnosis that it would be feasible to use it as an anesthesia, while by comparison scant few people are so resistant to chemical anesthesia as to render it non-functional.

While hypnosis has a statistically significant impact on symptom relief in many conditions, head-to-head comparisons of hypnosis versus pharmacological or surgical intervention simply don't come out in hypnosis' favor, either due to a lack of potency, a lack of susceptibility, or (more commonly) both..

In plain terms, while there was a sliver of time where pharmacology and surgery were primitive enough that hypnosis would have been viable as treatment, in a modern context hypnosis is simply too limited and too weak to compete as a serious medical technique.

However, the fact that hypnosis is real, that something actually happens makes it ripe for exploitation by quacks and hucksters who claim its efficacy at treating all manner of conditions, with no benefit above placebo.

While there is certainly a case to be made for skepticism of over-confidence in the wisdom and skill of doctors, the legitimate medical field is full of fraud, malpractice, and rat-bastards, there is an acute danger in hyper-skepticism. Medical scams prey off very root human fears of mortality, declining health, and fragility, and it is almost trivial to weaponize these fears and a little bit of skepticism into full-blown quackery.

For all the flaws and failings of scientific medicine there will always be a tenfold wave of charlatans waiting to tell you the "truth that doctors are keeping from you," entire libraries of claims about the healing power of hypnosis or reiki or quantum medicine or crystal therapy that, like Mesmer, are gleefully unburdened by proof, free to claim whatever will sell

best. This is the core business practice of homeopathy, where various active substances are diluted in water thousands or millions of times over until if any active products remain they are present in a low-single-digit count of molecules. The myth selling homeopathy is that water retains a potent supernatural “memory” of diseases and drugs, and thus water that “remembers” penicillin is just as effective as penicillin. To this end, while the practice of homeopathy is predicated on an “open source” myth, where healing is in fact cheap and plentiful, vendors are more than willing to save you the trouble of preparing your own dilutions of homeopathic ibuprofen by selling you some for a very reasonable fee. The keen-eyed viewer with a solid foundation in grade two mathematics may notice that tiny vials of tap water are an extremely low-overhead product.

While Braid set out to distinguish this new avenue of scientific inquiry from quackery, the quacks could always adapt faster.

The peak period of legitimacy for hypnosis following the work of Braid comes in the 1870s and 1880s in Europe. While hypnosis had failed to materialize as a serious treatment for physical illness, the mechanisms and interests of the field overlapped with the also newly emerging field of psychology.

Several theorists introduced the concept of dissociation, the theory that the hypnotized mind is “outside” itself, and thus better positioned for self-examination.

Pierre Janet hypothesized that the gradient of hypnotic states was the manifestation of a transition from the waking mind to the sleeping mind, a handover of control from the conscious to the unconscious, and that out of such a state a patient, burdened by psychological problems with no diagnosable cause, might be able to use a deep hypnotic state to reveal information about themselves that their waking mind struggled with sharing or even admitting.

Of particular interest were patients suffering conversion reactions, physical symptoms such as blindness, paralysis, and aphasia that sometimes follow stressful or traumatic episodes with no corresponding physical injury, and other symptoms of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder.

In his practice, utilizing hypnosis as a component of psychotherapy, Janet came to the conclusion that the overwhelming cause of these disorders was a history of sexual violence, particularly during childhood.

This finding would be echoed by several of his contemporaries including Ferenczi and Freud.

Freud's interest in hypnotism in and of itself was ultimately shallow, he was by accounts not particularly good at it and his technique was to bluntly hold the patient's head and command them "sleep" repeatedly. This, unsurprisingly, only resulted in hypnotizing a scant few patients.

Regardless, while hypnotism was instrumental in Janet's practice it was not the thing that led to Janet's conclusions about the trauma afflicting his patients, and thusly Freud's lack of skill as a practitioner of hypnosis did little to prevent him from reaching the same conclusions as Janet: society was plagued with unaddressed trauma from sexual violence, much of it perpetrated against children.

This conclusion was deeply controversial. As most of the assault was intrafamilial, parent/child or husband/wife, the popular wisdom was that it was thusly impossible. Wives "by definition" cannot be raped by their husbands, and parental incest was "obviously" against God's natural order, therefore perpetrators must be rare and exceptional monsters and not, as the reports suggested, common brutes. Reports of these assaults were dismissed as fantasy, attempts at revenge, overactive imagination, or false memories implanted in children by malicious outsiders. Physicians who believed their

patients and urged others to consider that the problem might even exist were ostracized from their professional communities.

Janet's puttered along in ignominy for the rest of his career, though his publications went largely, deliberately forgotten until the 1970s. Ferenczi likewise saw himself uninvited from the inner circles of the profession.

Freud, however, changed his tune. He recanted his research indicating a pandemic of child sexual assault and concocted the theory of Oedipal conflicts, that the children (and adults reflecting on trauma they endured as children) were not really traumatized, but merely reflecting on underlying sexual fantasies devised at an age too young for proper comprehension.

In this pivot Freud denounced Janet and excised the (already marginal) application of hypnosis from his practice.

While Freud's eventual fame and public status would do far more damage to the victims of sexual assault by impeding acceptance of their trauma for well into the 20th century, it also delegitimized the study of hypnosis at the moment where it was perhaps finding the one niche in which its application was meaningfully functional, effectively ceding the 20th century to spiritualists, gurus, spirit mediums, crystal healers, snake oil salesmen, and psychics.

The understanding of hypnosis did continue to advance into the 20th century, though the progress is sadly rather dry and marginal. Modern medical imaging has demonstrated that hypnosis is not in fact a form of sleep, that the brain is in fact highly engaged in an act of focus, but the chicken-or-egg question of whether hypnosis is a distinct brain state where the focus mechanisms of the brain are activated putting the subject into that mode or if it is social role-play where the

participant hyper-fixates thus activating the focus mechanisms in the brain remains unanswered.

Perhaps the most interesting development of the 20th century was the codification that induction techniques don't really matter, beyond broad elements of relaxation and focus there is little to the technique itself that is potent or meaningful beyond the practitioner's comfort and the subject's receptibility. A receptive subject will achieve trance almost regardless of the specifics of the induction, reinforcing the observation that in effect the subject hypnotizes themselves, the hypnotist is just an aide.

# THEATRICAL HYPNOSIS

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It's worth taking some time and dedicating some attention specifically to the mechanisms and operations of theatrical hypnosis, how it works, why it works, what's going on, and how it differs (or aligns) with "true" hypnosis.

Critical to understanding this is the observation that hypnotic states exist along a spectrum, that there's a whole gradient of head-space that is encompassed by the processes of hypnosis. However the complication of that, the lack of a clear, decisive changeover point, is that it makes it difficult to truly define at what point someone is "hypnotized." This complication forms the nucleus of the most common argument about stage hypnotism: are the participants *actually* hypnotized or are they *merely* in a trace-adjacent state where, via a combination of complex elements of personality, setting, and social cues they are particularly receptive to suggestion?

Conversely how is "a trace-adjacent state where, via a combination of complex elements of personality, setting, and social cues they are particularly receptive to suggestion" meaningfully different from hypnosis?

This argument, for what it's worth, is extremely old. Magnetists, charlatans, and magicians adopted the word "hypnosis" for their own stage shows basically as soon as the word was coined, and the writings of late 19th century medical hypnotists are rife with political, medical, and sectarian arguments for the regulation of hypnosis in order to demarcate their practices from the "vulgar" showmanship of the stage hypnotist.

This goal, however, was hampered by none other than the medical hypnotists themselves, who were just as often inclined towards superstitions, ethical breaches, and theatrics of their own. Furthermore, attempts to bind the training and use of hypnosis to practice of medical professionals was impeded by the simple fact that what it takes to be a hypnotist simply isn't terribly complex, making the training difficult to monopolize.

Anyone can learn the basic principles from a pamphlet, and the rest amounts to personal skill and, critically, the predisposition of the subject. As we've already covered in the history, many trained physicians, such as Freud, were bluntly awful at it.

As this is an argument of degrees, settling it is likely to be impossible, but for the purposes of this book we will, at the very least, consider stage hypnotism to be a *form* of hypnosis.

The reason for this is that it's perhaps a more honest approach. Dismissing what happens during a stage show, the complex, often silent, negotiation of trust, as "not hypnosis" undercuts the truth of what hypnosis really is. This is, of course, exactly why some practitioners do so: cutting away the stage magician elevates the therapist and lends their practice a bit more prestige, distance, and mysticism.

Reality is a bit more boring, and in that it is fascinating.

Twenty volunteers go up on stage and through the process of being asked to perform a variety of actions they are whittled down to a handful of subjects. These filtering activities look for three primary traits: relaxation, focus, and plasticity. The ideal candidate is someone who is able to relax, concentrate, step outside themselves, and, critically, to receive some level of emotional reward from the act of participating.

The process of stage hypnosis tends to utilize a fixation exercise, often similar to James Braid's method of inducing trance via eye strain such as having participants focus on a bright blue light. The depth of this trance state will depend on the susceptibility of the individual subjects but it's fair to say that for the chaos of an average show it will tend towards the lighter end.

The show itself, and the often extreme suggestions, are aided by setting, expectation and, often, the presence of alcohol. The participants want to be there, they want to have fun, they want to be hypnotized, they want to see what it's like, and they have maybe had a drink or two and are already a bit disinhibited.

From this the hypnotist is creating an emotional environment where compliance, going with the flow, adopting suggestions, and complying with instructions is the emotionally preferable course of action.

To quote physicist Richard Feynman on his experience being hypnotized for a demonstration

“...at the end he said that after I came out of hypnosis, instead of returning to my seat directly, which was the natural way to go, I would walk all the way around the room and go to my seat from the back.

All through the demonstration I was vaguely aware of what was going on, and cooperating with the things the hypnotist said, but this time I decided, “Damn it, enough is enough! I'm gonna go straight to my seat.”

When it was time to get up and go off the stage, I started to walk straight to my seat. But then an annoying feeling came over me: I felt so uncomfortable that I couldn't continue. I walked all the way around the hall.



...

So I found hypnosis to be a very interesting experience. All the time you're saying to yourself, "I could do that, but I won't" — which is just another way of saying that you can't."

Richard Feynman, *Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman!*,  
1985

This echoes the experience of many others who have tried to describe their performances in a stage hypnotist's show, the sense of being keenly aware of what was going on, their agency in the scenario, and the sensation that participation is the effortless, right course of action.

This is, to anyone who has been in a social scenario where people collectively psych themselves into bad ideas, unexceptional, which is perhaps the most fascinating thing about hypnosis as a subject.

Many overt critics will dismiss stage hypnosis as collective fantasy or as a performative induction, the outcome of peer pressure and the will to buy in, the result of the "power of imagination", but to echo de Jussieu, isn't the power of imagination also fascinating?

What if that is not evidence of the absence of hypnosis, but an accurate, incisive description of hypnosis?

Comedian magicians and skeptics Penn & Teller on their 2004 program *Bullshit!* dismiss stage hypnosis as merely "collective imagination" which does strike me a bit as dismissing a sandwich as merely a collection of bread, fillings, and condiments. Perhaps the most fascinating thing about hypnosis, demonstrated by the stage hypnotist, is the mundanity of it, the persuasive power of set and setting, the power of suggestion in a collaborative, negotiated

relationship, the amplified state of being open to being persuaded, and the ways in which that is, in and of itself, interesting.

However there's a persuasive semantic argument to be made in the defence of absolute skepticism.

Stage hypnotists are performers, and as such there's an element to their act, to the fiction of it, that is focused on putting on a good show over the accuracy of their claims about human psychology. This is, I think, fair enough (and Penn & Teller agree) however that performance exists adjacent to an entire arm of medicalized hypnosis, which encompasses science-based therapeutic applications and— in far, far greater concentration— a vast ecosystem of hucksters and charlatans.

Indeed, as has already been demonstrated, the history of the stage hypnotist entertainer and the history of the medical fraud are actually deeply entwined, and not so long ago the two were, in fact, the same thing.

And even, in the internet age, it can be argued that the ecosystem of streaming, social media, and online video has revitalized the hazy performance of the theatrical mystic, a blurred medium occupying the ever-shifting duality of entertainment and healer in order to claim the protection of whatever category is of convenience.

In this environment where the base definition of “hypnotism” is vigorously self-applied to so much snake oil, so much grift, with an entirely disproportionate bias, when the practical applications of hypnosis are ultimately so constrained while hucksters run among claiming all manner of cures, therapeutics, and remedies, is it unfair to cede the word to them?

This was, in effect, James Braid's argument in the coining of "hypnosis": the realm of magnetists and mesmerists is so poisoned by the occult, the mystical, the pseudoscientific, that there is no value to be gained from reclamation, no purpose in pursuing a rehabilitation of the vocabulary. Braid considered it his imperative as a scientist to start over and reject the legacy vocabulary because regardless of whatever kernel of therapeutic fact was hidden in the middle of their performance, it carried too much baggage.

"It will be observed, for reasons adduced, I have now entirely separated Hypnotism from Animal Magnetism. I consider it to be merely a simple, speedy, and certain mode of throwing the nervous system into a new condition, which may be rendered eminently available in the cure of certain disorders"

Braid, *Neurypnology*, 1843

So this becomes something of a sticking point in the subject as a whole. What are we, collectively, to make of hypnosis? What definition are we persuaded to use? This is the struggle of speaking on the subject. Given the preponderance of the evidence, the observable way in which the word "hypnosis" is used rhetorically, it is not, in fact, indefensible to dismiss any claim about hypnosis as a default reaction.

But, for our purposes to this point and for the remainder of this book we will adopt the opinion of James Braid, that there is an observable, interesting human phenomena that is worthy of our attention, which is surrounded by a cloud of grifters, quacks, and malingerers.

# LOOK INTO MY EYES: HYPNOSIS AND POPULAR CULTURE

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A man with black, unkempt hair and a wild beard looks directly into the camera and commands “look into my eyes.” A rotating spiral fades in, superimposed over his face, the ethereal keens of a theremin injects into the soundtrack. “You will do whatever I say, you are now under my command.”

In 1943 as James Braid was assembling the manuscript that would fully demolish what remained of Elliotson’s career the disgraced doctor founded a new periodical, the *Zoist*, as a vehicle in which to continue his defence of mesmerism. In the opening issue Elliotson invokes his friendship with Charles Dickens, whom he had taught the art of mesmerism.

The *Zoist* would not save Elliotson, nor his reputation, which, despite his many legitimate and notable contributions to the field of medicine which helped move the science away from the barbaric and towards the humane, has never recovered.

Dickens, conversely, would only see his career accelerate. Already an internationally popular author owing to *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, 1843 would see the publication of *A Christmas Carol*, which would cement his position in English literature for centuries to follow (seeming probable, at the time of writing in 2022, that Dickens will remain relevant enough for another two decades that the plays, films, and public readings of *A Christmas Carol* will remain popular well into its bicentennial.)

Dickens found in mesmerism a validating belief, an ego-flattering epistemology in which the personality traits that allowed him to produce his prodigious volumes of work were

evidence of some deep well of potent energy and will that he was able to tap into, a high-supernatural power at his disposal.

In Dickens' eagerness to perform he found himself repeatedly mesmerizing the wife of a friend, Madam Augusta de la Rue. While the engagements began with the intent to address Augusta's anxiety attacks and insomnia, their sessions, and the letters that they sent between them, grew increasingly intimate, to a degree that would aggravate the destabilization of Dickens' marriage to his wife Catherine.

Mesmerism was, from its inception in the practice of Franz Mesmer, flamboyant and theatrical, adorned with orientalist trappings and the borrowed poise of the faith healer. The process, taking place as it did so often in darkened rooms littered with couches and pillows, involving Mesmer in his purple silk robe rubbing the arms, neck, belly, and legs of bored socialite women, while commanding them in soft-spoken tones, it was always adjacent to the sensual, and thus it is no surprise that this lascivious angle is the one that pop culture has broadly seized upon and amplified.

If the mesmerists are themselves inclined to the sensational, the sensual, to the over-prescription of their powers, then it seems practically reasonable that the storyteller would only amplify the drama.

Even Dickens, a believer, allows the precepts of mesmerism, the ontology and epistemology of mesmerism, to inform his depictions of the supernatural. While Dickens didn't believe in ghosts, openly rejecting spiritualism, he was fascinated by the idea of ghosts, the idea of ghost stories. Why and how do we construct these tales, and could mesmerism be the key? When Scrooge is confronted by the shade of Marley he attempts to dismiss the spirit as a concrete physical phenomenon.

“What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses?”

“I don’t know,” said Scrooge.

“Why do you doubt your senses?”

“Because,” said Scrooge, “a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There’s more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!”

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843

Contemporary to Dickens, across the Atlantic in America, Edgar Allan Poe would pen three short stories that utilized mesmerism as a plot point, *Mesmeric Revelation* (1844), *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains* (1844), and *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* (1845). Poe, as with many of his contemporaries, as fond of presenting his fiction in the format and aesthetic of scientific literature, often publishing stories in contexts that would deliberately confuse the nature of the work itself. One of his reliable publishers, Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book, published fiction, non-fiction, opinion, editorial, and documentary indiscriminately.

Interestingly Poe’s stance on mesmerism is of an odd antagonism. Two of the stories, *Mesmeric Revelations* and *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, are told explicitly from the point of view of the mesmerist and offer defences of the craft even as its application yields morbid results. To this end Poe, as with most fiction writers, is principally interested in mesmerism (and later hypnosis) as an aesthetic concept.

Bram Stoker, whose writings saddle the 19th and 20th centuries, utilized mesmerism heavily, though the scope of his interest is nuanced to the point of including Franz Mesmer in the 1910 non-fiction *Famous Imposters*. In the book Stoker offers a defence of hypnotism as “having been tested and employed in therapeutics for a century, [it] is accepted as a

contribution to science” but excoriates Mesmer for, in essence, going astray and indulging in the performative, the theatrical, and thus burdening the “ernest science” with the taint of charlatanism, for being an imposter and practitioner of magic. In Stoker’s earlier 1897 (and most popular) novel, *Dracula* both the Count and his opponent, Van Helsing, are competent in hypnotic practices, the two dueling by proxy via Mina Harker who has come under the sway of the Count.

Stoker, though, like Poe, utilizes hypnosis principally as an aesthetic, in particular utilizing it as a means to introduce and explain the book’s supernatural phenomena.

““Yes,” I said. “Charcot has proved that pretty well.” He smiled as he went on: “Then you are satisfied as to it. Yes? And of course then you understand how it act, and can follow the mind of the great Charcot—alas that he is no more!—into the very soul of the patient that he influence. No? Then, friend John, am I to take it that you simply accept fact, and are satisfied to let from premise to conclusion be a blank? No? Then tell me—for I am student of the brain—how you accept the hypnotism and reject the thought-reading. Let me tell you, my friend, that there are things done to-day in electrical science which would have been deemed unholy by the very men who discovered electricity—who would themselves not so long before have been burned as wizards.”

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, 1897

Hypnosis is heavily employed throughout the novel, as it allows the protagonists to exploit the psychic link that has formed between the as-not-yet fully turned Mina and the Count. This is noteworthy because by a far margin the works of the late 19th century utilized hypnosis narratively entirely as a tool of the mischievous.

Overwhelmingly the narrative employment of hypnosis from the late 19th to late 20th century is as a tool of deception, a means for villains and the villainous to manipulate others for money, revenge, or sexual conquest. These portrayals are informed principally by the craft of magicians, stage hypnotists, spirit mediums, and mind-readers, with little to no regard for the opinions of scientists.

Much like the terms “quantum,” “nano,” and “cyber” might be thrown around by characters in lab coats and black-rimmed glasses in a trashy action thriller from the year 2000 with little bearing on factuality, feasibility, or even base regard for the laws of physics, hypnosis is employed in these films and books as a narrative wrench, a tool with a mechanical job to perform. It would be amiss to say that the fictional employment of hypnosis reflects misperceptions about the phenomena so much as it represents a total disregard for factuality: the authors do not know, nor do they care.

*Trilby*, the (incredibly antisemitic) 1894 story of a Bohemian ingenue whose vocal talents are unlocked by the dastardly (and extremely Jewish) Svengali and his hypnotic powers is unburdened by factuality. The titular Trilby is held in hypnotic trance for years, where she becomes a superstar on the basis of her singing, a talent which she only possesses while under Svengali’s control. In the end Trilby dies, emaciated by the effects of Svengali’s control which, it is implied, has not merely caused her neglect but has sapped her of some vital essence.

The story would influence in some significant measure Gaston Leroux’s *The Phantom of the Opera* (1910) where a young, beautiful woman is also enthralled by an older man who unlocks her hidden talents. While the means of the Phantom’s influence over Christine Daae is not expounded upon, left as a nebulous force of personality, the trappings of a *mystical* hypnosis are present, and amplified in Andrew



Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation where Christine is led, entranced, down to the bowels of the opera house.

The 1911 film adaptation of *Trilby*, retitled *Svengali*, established the visual language of hypnosis that would persist for nearly a century, the mesmerist's eyes lined with black and lit with a sharp highlight to imply some power radiating from them. This motif, the piercing eye-light, would show up regularly for decades, even being condensed to a visual shorthand for any sort of psychic power which a character might wish to employ against another, as in *Star Trek* (1966).

In *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959) Sergeant Raymond Shaw is converted by the Soviets into a sleeper agent, an assassin who is unaware that he is even the vehicle for the crime being committed. This plotline, where hypnotism is used to create unaware conspirators to a crime, is perhaps even more common in fiction than the employment for sexual conquest, with stories utilizing the trope spanning from the 21st century (*Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, 2001) all the way back to the second heyday of Mesmerism.

Orson Welles' 1949 film *Black Magic* adapts a portion of Alexandre Dumas' 1848 "Marie Antoinette romance" *Joseph Balsamo*, a fictional story about the otherwise real Count Cagliostro. In the Welles film Cagliostro learns his craft from Mesmer himself, and though implored to use this power only to cure the ill, the Count uses it to become wealthy and famous, to seduce women, and to impel his enemies to harm themselves.

In the 1996 episode of *The X-Files*, 'Pusher', Robert Patrick Modell has the ability to hypnotize anyone almost instantly, to convince them that they can't see oncoming vehicles, to release him from custody, that they remember someone else passing instead of them, that they accept a recipe card with the word "pass" written on it in marker as valid credentials for

entering high-security areas, or even to induce a heart attack. While Modell's abilities are ultimately explained as psychic powers enabled by a brain tumor (which was also the plot of 1996 John Travolta film *Phenomenon*) the specific trappings of Modell's powers hinge on a combination of pure fantasy and things hypnotists claim to be able to do.

These authors and filmmakers in their disregard for the opinions of scientific practitioners are, ultimately, taking the far more common spiritualist practitioner at their word. If the midwestern anglo showman, decked in a turban and wielding a mystical medallion, claims the ability to speak with the dead, if the once-respectable Dr. Elliotson claimed Elizabeth Okey could diagnose patients whose tumors evaded the probing of doctors, if Anton Mesmer claimed the power to change reality simply by staring at it hard enough, isn't it more exciting if that were true?

The highlighting of Svengali's eyes with sharp rays of light, the soundtracks evoking a mystical, unseen power, the animated eye beams that pierce the mind of the subject, these are at once a pure fiction and, by inadvertent consequence, doing the work of mythmaking for the mystics.

This is the employment of hypnosis first and foremost as aesthetic, the word that is attached to the diegesis' need for a force that can control minds, manipulate matter, and commune with spirits.

Proponents of hypnosis inclined towards science find this tact frustrating. Much of Diedre Barrett's essay *Hypnosis in Popular Media* is concerned with being concerned about the propagation of stereotypes of what hypnosis is, the ways in which it is performed, and what it is capable of. But, as we find to be a recurring tension in the subject as a whole, is it truly unfair to depict hypnosis as fiction if the plurality, if not overwhelming majority, of hypnosis-as-practiced is itself fiction in its employment?

Modern fictional depictions of hypnosis reflect either an overt utilization of hypnosis as aesthetic, such as Zoolander aping a century of stories about brainwashed murderers in a sequence where the male supermodel Derek Zoolander is turned into a Manchurian-candidate-esque assassin tasked with killing the president of Malaysia, or as a reflection of modern mysticism as police employ hypnotists to uncover details about crimes via the equally fictional process of hypnotic regression.

In *Donnie Darko* (2001) the titular character attends a therapist who utilizes hypnosis as part of their sessions. Donnie is a disturbed and unstable teenager with deeply rooted problems of anger and impulse control, haunted by intense nightmares and occasional horrifying hallucinations. The employment of hypnosis is, diegetically, presented as valid and useful and meaningful, only hampered, from the audience's perspective, by the therapist's lack of a full understanding of what is going on (which, given that Donnie is glimpsing the future chain of events necessary to correct a time paradox, is understandable) leading to her role in the plot as an occasional obstacle and occasional aide.

Fox Mulder, one of the two protagonists of 90s supernatural primetime horror drama *The X-Files*, often recommends hypnosis as a mechanism for surfacing the suppressed memories of those who have had encounters with the supernatural, though in service of the show's overall plot and tone the value of these sessions is often left uncertain, with it implied at various times that hypnotically retrieved memories may, themselves, have been hypnotically implanted in the first place.

Barrett derides these depictions of hypnotic regression and memory recall as positive, but ultimately still harmful, stereotypes

“Even when hypnosis is depicted as having beneficial effects, it is still portrayed as terrifyingly powerful and as many false stereotypes are perpetuated. [...] An absolute postulate of these films is that material recalled under hypnosis is unerringly accurate no matter how farfetched.”

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Deidre Barrett, Editor, 2010

The complication with Barrett’s criticism is that these depictions of hypnotism as a fantastic force all align with claims made by modern practitioners.

Indeed a non-zero number of people otherwise unconcerned with hypnosis in one way or another still seem to conflate the aesthetic with actual power.

One such case, notable for being extremely funny, is the tweet of occasionally respectable researcher Steven Hassan, an expert in high-control groups, who, on December 15th, 2021, wrote “I hope [PornHub] are deleting all hypnosis videos. I watched two videos to convince people they were another gender. What I saw was highly sophisticated mind control. Detransitioners pointed me to them!”

Now, there’s a lot to unpack in this tweet, (and it wasn’t the first time Steven had tweeted about the subject) but the primary thing of interest to us is the genre of pornography that Steven is referring to, which is often referred to as “sissy hypno.”

“Sissy hypno” is its own can of worms in some very specific ways that are well outside the purview of this work, and thus for the sake of something resembling brevity we’ll constrain ourselves to the dimensions which directly intersect the use of hypnosis.

It is a subgenre of the larger trend of “hypnoporn.” In our consideration of the use of hypnosis as *aesthetic* with little regard for its efficacy we will hardly find a purer example than how it is generally employed in pornography. Unlike conventional narrative fiction, pornography is more often willing to engage in textual dialogue with the viewer, placing the viewer as a theoretical direct participant in the fiction. Hosts will address the viewer, instruct them, and simulate direct reactions to the viewer’s hypothetical responses. The genre as a whole enjoys substantial overlap with the genre known as ASMR.

In this regard the vast majority of so called “hypno porn” is structured with no intent or presumption of inducing actual hypnosis, but merely as an extension of similar direct-to-viewer genres of pornography. The utilization is entirely for the purpose of scene building, as it harkens to the acts of stage hypnotists and plays to the viewer’s expectations of what hypnosis looks and sounds like, which is itself largely derived from pop culture. All pornography, by definition and design, caters to fantasy. The emotional utility of hypno porn, similar to the set and setting of the stage hypnotist, is to provide a space wherein non-normative performance of some kind or another is permissible.

In “sissy hypno” the (presumably cis male) viewer is “hypnotized” into performing a hyperfeminine, hypersexual role within the narrative by a prerecorded, typically female, presenter. Of course “performing” should itself be put in quotes as a caveat, as the pornography, as a video, remains asynchronous. There is no mechanism to ensure compliance or even action on the part of the viewer. The viewer may get up and act out instructions in exacting compliance with the presentation, or they may simply imagine doing so. And, of course, to the crux of the tweet, it would remain incapable of meaningfully, permanently convincing a viewer that they were a different gender or even any specific gender.

The diegesis of the text (yes, we're ascribing pornography with a diegesis) generally supposes a fictional, all-powerful version of hypnosis that is functionally mind-control, an overwhelming subsuming of the subject's will and identity under the power and influence of the presenter.

The motives for engaging with such material span a broad array of intents, as with most sexual power dynamics. For some viewers the material is a means to exploring a space that they would more readily engage with if it were permissible, and thus the need for the layer of fiction where agency has been removed from them and they just-so-happen to find themselves somewhere they wanted to be anyway. For others the destination doesn't much matter: it is the interplay of power, the idea of having will stripped away that is appealing or merely the power dynamics of having an authoritative woman tell them what to do regardless of what the instructions are, and hypnosis functions merely as flavour. And still for others it is the specifics of discomfort that appeal to them, being made (or at the very least told) to do things that they specifically find repellant, that drives their gratification. Lastly some viewers fixate on the concept of hypnotism itself (or slightly more broadly the idea of brainwashing or mind-control) as a paraphilia where, once again, the instructions themselves are of little concern.

In these regards commonalities and overlaps can be seen with the practice of BDSM in general. Generally the practice of actual hypnosis in a consensual sexual environment falls under this umbrella, owing to these intersections of power exchange and consent. It is, perhaps, no surprise that people assumed mesmerism was being used for sexual purposes given the people who would enthusiastically submit to it being used specifically for those purposes.

As a quirky fact of history, the genre of hypno porn is quite old. The oldest known motion picture falling under the umbrella dates to sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

(Early-20th century “stag” films weren’t made by any authorized or registered producer, being in direct contravention of contemporary decency laws, thus authenticating any specific piece is typically difficult.) In the strip a couple visits a fortune-teller (an “exotic” light-skinned black woman adorned in theatrical “gypsy” garb, lest it go unremarked that the scene is both racialized and orientalized) who, via hypnosis, first seduces the wife, then the husband, then the two of them simultaneously.

ASMR is an interesting case study as it not only utilizes something of the aesthetic of hypnosis but more directly utilizes the actual mechanisms of hypnosis. The genre is a YouTube-originating phenomenon, a whole vast ecosystem of videos and influencers accruing hundreds of millions of views collectively every month. ASMR, the genre, takes its name from ASMR, the physical phenomenon. “Autonomous sensory meridian response” is a typically pleasant tingling sensation that usually begins in the scalp before transitioning, or rippling, down the back of the neck and upper spine. Similar to a piss-shiver it is a paresthesia (pins and needles) triggered by some otherwise unrelated stimulus. In the case of ASMR, the genre, the original intent was to deliberately collect and record the kinds of sounds that people found commonly triggered the response, often rhythmic things like the sound of the pages of a book being fanned, the tines of a comb being stroked, or a very “present” soothing whisper. (Present, in this case, referring to a phenomenon of microphones where the lower-range vocal characteristics are amplified by the speaker being very close to the microphone’s diaphragm. When combined with the specific vocal context cues of whispering it creates the illusion that the speaker is intimately close to the listener.)

This has led to an evolution of ASMR (the genre) to more immediately refer to a genre of video wherein a presenter with aesthetically appealing vocal characteristics whispers into a binaural microphone to create an intense sense of

presence as they tell a story or repeat affirmations. The contents may be deliberately banal, repetitive, and soothing, or frightening or even erotic. The presenter might give the listener instructions about what to do, how to posture, and what to think about, and in this moment you're probably seeing the subject loop back around. Most modern hypnoporn is, in fact, an outgrowth of erotic ASMR. The base structure of ASMR is already barely removed from hypnotic induction, and Elman's 1964 script (reprinted in Chapter 1) would fit right in with any ASMR compilation.

Whether it be Fox Mulder reclining on a couch to recall locked memories of his sister's abduction (was it aliens? Was it the government?), a leather-clad dominatrix telling you you are now under her complete control, or a bearded mystic commanding a nubile waif to look into his eyes, two centuries of pop culture and mesmerism have been gleefully disinterested in the actual mechanisms or boundaries of hypnotism and more interested in the far more engaging *idea* of hypnotism.

As already mentioned the mechanisms of hypnosis in pop culture tend to mirror the craft of the stage hypnotist or the charlatan more than that of the therapist, but it's worth admitting that the lines there are far less clear cut than the simple description would make it sound. The line between a charlatan and an entertainer is a hazy one almost entirely dictated by a nebulous question of *honesty*. The craft of the charlatan must, by purpose, be entertaining and engaging, it must draw a crowd. Even Dr. Elliotson, convinced he was on the cutting edge of medicine as he drew sutures through the skin of Elizabeth Okey's neck, still saw fit to draw paying customers to his operating room. The line between pop-culture and practice is not so clear simply because humans do not so granularly distinguish between entertaining and compelling. Even the true believers would rather worship under a minister with charisma than one who is doctrinally sound but dryer than shredded newsprint.



Even well-meaning practitioners need to contend with these questions: to what degree am I useful because I employ hypnosis, and to what degree am I useful because I'm entertaining and engaging?

# THERAPUTIC APPLICATION

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A key concept that needs to be discussed before digging into the question of the therapeutic application of hypnosis is a conversation about the phenomenon known as The Placebo Effect.

The placebo effect is, in short, an identified mechanism where mere belief in a cure is enough to effect some slight but measurable improvement in a patient's condition. Two patients are given a pill and told it will get rid of their headache. One of the pills contains acetaminophen, the other is entirely inert chalk dust and sucrose. After 30 minutes both patients report their headache has declined.

Hypnotists have a rocky history of contending with the placebo effect, it's a controversial comparison. Many reject it outright, insisting that hypnosis has some other potent psychological mechanisms that it allows therapists to tap into. Others embrace the comparison, as it allows them to temper their claims. "Hypnosis," they say, "is a direct utilization of the placebo effect," a claim that, to their credit, would in fact be interesting and valid, if limited.

The range of conditions and symptoms and habits that hypnotists and mesmerists have *claimed* the ability to treat over the past two hundred and fifty years is long and wide, from hysteria to dementia to epilepsy to anxiety to palsy to fear of death to neurosis to hypochondria and "all manner of neurological disorders." The over-prescription of hypnosis is pretty significant, and even generally respectable academic practitioners such as the Harvard-affiliated Deidre Barrett cannot resist the use of superlatives like "marvelous therapy."

The fundamental hurdle that clinical, science-driven hypnosis needs to contend with is that it is, all things considered, just not that potent as a therapeutic tool, hampered as it is by a few key limitations.

Firstly a relatively small slice of the population is acutely susceptible to hypnosis, less than 20% and possibly as low as 5%. These are favourably large numbers if you're just trying to find participants for a theatrical demonstration, but poor if you're trying to weigh the practice against, say, pharmacological anesthesia. While virtually everyone is physically capable of trance to some degree and most people with some effort can reach a hypnotic state, the depth of the hypnotic state matters as a question of degree, because if a light trance is sufficient for the mechanisms to activate then hypnosis as a distinct practice is redundant with virtually any relaxation technique.

“Very few people are totally unhypnotizable, but the number able to experience the deepest hypnotic phenomena—eyes open hallucinations, negative hallucinations (failing to perceive something that is right in front of one), suggested amnesia and analgesia sufficient for surgery—is similarly small.”

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Second, the results are limited. The two most commonly claimed applications are in habit control, namely diet and smoking, but actual long-term results are comparable with other willpower-based modes of habit control, which is to say “eh.” This can be ascribed to some degree by a lack of *therapeutic* skill amongst practitioners, as simply being in a hypnotic state is not the active mechanism of therapeutic results, but given the messy and diverse conditions of real-world application even best-case scenario results aren't especially remarkable.

“People come to hypnotherapy with similar complaints and hopes to those they bring to any treatment for physical or psychological problems. Despite the added role of hypnotizability, most of the same factors determine the outcome: the skill of the therapist, the patient’s motivation to drop old patterns, the rapport between patient and therapist, and how supportive family and friends are of change.”

That isn’t to say that attending hypnotherapy to quit smoking *won’t* work, but to say that it *might* work, provided conditions are otherwise favourable. This is because the actual mechanism of hypnosis hinges entirely on the power of suggestion to rewire thought patterns. This is the goal of virtually all psychotherapy, from CBT to psychoanalysis: helping a patient restructure negative, harmful, or disruptive thought patterns by either recontextualizing them, working around them, or strengthening other thought patterns. Unlike morphine, a chemical that bonds with opioid receptors in the brain, psychotherapy isn’t a direct acting mechanism, it’s a process of untangling a specific individual’s very precise damage.

The operational concept behind modern clinical hypnotherapy is that in a trance state the normal ego-screens and other defence mechanisms are minimized by dissociation. The patient is able to “step outside themselves”, so to speak and self-evaluate from a more neutral position which can help clarify goals or recontextualize problems. People all have disconnects between things that they know, meaning concepts that they can illustrate and explain, and things that they know, meaning ideas that motivate actions. A patient with an intense, irrational fear of the dark may know that their house does not become supernaturally dangerous simply by turning off the lights, but that doesn’t assuage the animating belief that it does. In a hypnotic state this hypothetical patient may be better able to integrate these

ideas, convert knowledge into belief, step back and realize that their bedroom is inanimate, that stuff is in the same place, just as inert and harmless, when the lights are on and when they're off.

Ultimately the most reliable predictor of success with any habit cessation program is a whole-picture question of environment and socialization. While some people can overcome chemical addiction through raw willpower, someone who uses cigarettes as a coping mechanism for dealing with an overbearing parent or oppressive job will be extremely unlikely to shake the habit for more than a few months at a time as long as they're living in the same house or working the same job.

If you eat to cope with stress it is practically the definition of "treating the symptoms and not the disease" to try and mind-hack your relationship to food rather than addressing the causes of stress (though, yes, the structure of our society more often than not makes this kind of fundamental problem-solving impossible without access to wealth, thus creating the conditions for a flourishing ecosystem of "low cost" "cures" that we will discuss in greater detail in chapter 6.)

The promising element of hypnotherapy is that in these kinds of applications, seeking these kinds of breakthroughs, the process may be *accelerated* when compared to other therapeutic techniques. Put another way hypnosis does not seem to offer *better* results per-se than other techniques, but may achieve *comparable* results in fewer sessions.

This is, however, all undercut by the persistent specter of over-prescription. There is no governing body that dictates who can or can't call themselves a hypnotherapist. While there are accrediting groups that will offer someone training and qualifications, a seal of approval that they can attach to their practice, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of such organizations all posturing as legitimate and authoritative with

no standard of rigour about what can or should be claimed as practical or achievable results of the practice, and many of these groups are overtly fraudulent, a money-making scheme of selling “credentials” to crank practitioners in desperate need of the appearance of legitimacy. This, combined with the rock-bottom barrier to entry given that anyone can learn the clumsy basics of how to hypnotize in an hour or two, makes hypnosis an eternally attractive practice for the vast industry of pseudo-medical practitioners.

As a Reddit commenter framed it, hypnosis is effectively “open source”, the base mechanisms are relatively simple and thus anyone can come along, add on some trappings of their own invention (or, as is more common, borrowed liberally from somewhere else), tack on the aesthetic that will best sell to your target market, whether that mean “mystical” or “scientific”, and there’s little anyone can do to intervene.

Perhaps it is here in a discussion of the valid clinical applications that we would best discuss the risks. There is a very real danger in the clumsy over-application of hypnosis. While hypnosis cannot impel someone to do something that they are morally opposed to or believe things that they deeply disagree with this is essentially just a roundabout way of acknowledging that an unskilled, zealous, crank practitioner applying hypnotic suggestion to an acutely vulnerable or unstable person can, in fact, do real damage, particularly if they believe in past life regression or similar pervasive woo. The bad therapist can easily indulge and accelerate false, harmful memories that create all new concentration points for newly synthesized traumas based in nothing but a story imagined under the guidance of a careless quack. These fraudulent memories can easily convince the vulnerable that they are guilty of sins they did not commit or the victim of crimes that they did not suffer. They can, in actual effect, brainwash the patients most in need of care.

There are a not-insubstantial number of cults and other high-control groups that utilize quasi-hypnosis, pop cultural ideas of hypnosis and pseudoscience, and things that are materially indistinct from past-life regression as part of their psychological breaking process.

# CRANK MAGNETISM

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Crank magnetism is a phenomenon wherein cranks, people who hold “an unshakable belief that most of their contemporaries consider to be false”, tend to be attracted to multiple crank ideas at the same time. It is also, in the words of RationalWiki, “the tendency — even for otherwise “lone issue” cranks — to accumulate more crank beliefs over time.” The term was first coined by Mark Hoofnagle in 2007 on the Denialism to describe conspiracy theorists who held multiple unrelated conspiratorial beliefs simultaneously.

Many people with weird, fringe, conspiratorial political beliefs also hold other weird, fringe, conspiratorial medical beliefs. It is not difficult to find someone, such as RooshV, who holds conspiratorial anti-semitic beliefs in addition to mystical beliefs about masculinity and semen retention, the belief that each ejaculation causes men to “lose” some fraction of their essential manliness.

People who promote one fringe, crank medical belief (such as quantum healing or reiki (which the keen eyed will notice is ultimately just Mesmer’s animal magnetism re-painted and merged with massage) are attracted to other crank medical beliefs like crystal healing and mesmerism. These individuals tend to assume a dogmatic opposition to mainstream medicine, peddling their practice specifically on the grounds that it’s *not* overseen by rigorous “interference” from doctors. They may be true believers, themselves convinced that crystals do have a resonance frequency that disrupts cancer cells, or they may be simple mercenaries exploiting a market of believers willing to part with their cash in exchange for a few dollars worth of quartz.



This all falls under the common brand “alternative medicine,” a vast field of eclectic “treatments” that range from over-application of actual therapy to outright quackery and snake oil. Ivermectin is a real drug with actual pharmaceutical effects, but the use of it as a prophylactic against SARS-CoV-2 is snake oil originating not from evidence-based application, but word-of-mouth from conspiracy theorists and anti-establishment cranks. Massage feels great and can relieve tension, help the subject relax, improve blood flow, and provide temporary relief from some kinds of pain, but it will not realign your mystical energies, and back spasms can’t be cured via “reflexology” foot massage. The reiki spa where you go to have your energies realigned almost certainly sells “Himalayan” salt lamps to “negatively ionize your room” in their shop.

Mesmerism was decidedly a crank medical practice (even relative to the barbarism of the medical field of its day, marked as it was still by bloodletting and a dispassionate regard of patients as subjects who might be lucky in pursuit of a cure rather than people seeking relief from pain and suffering) and although the vocabulary has shifted that line remains unbroken.

A central problem in evaluating a hypnotherapist in the modern era, to try and sort the quacks from the evidence-based, is that even the mostly evidence-based practitioners are likely to indulge in popular pseudo-therapies. The aesthetics that attract practitioners to hypnosis, existing as it does on the edge of medicine, are the same that attract them to wider varieties of pseudo-medicine. “Licensed” hypnotherapists are just as likely to sell salt lamps and offer referrals for “problems stemming from misaligned chakras” as the unlicensed wild cat practitioners.

Hypnosis as an aesthetic appeals to the same kind of practitioners and patrons as the rest of a vast industry of quacks, cranks, and charlatans selling all manner of cure-all

for any and every ailment under the sun based almost entirely on the premise that it's good specifically because it falls outside the purview of the medical establishment. This is a deep, long-historied narrative with conspiratorial flavouring, the typical story being that the medical establishment are all frauds and liars who have merely discovered a means to relieve some symptoms while deliberately, knowingly prolonging illness itself. The idea is that doctors categorically keep patients sick on purpose in order to maximize lifelong profit, and thus they have a vested interest in downplaying or discrediting any "true" cures, especially if those cures are simple to perform or based on cheap, readily-accessed materials or techniques. The logic thus extends that anything on the fringe must *by definition* be the *real* cures, or else they would have been subsumed into the fraudulent body of mainstream medicine.

This worldview is complexly augmented by some non-zero basis in fact. Medical history is peppered liberally with absolute rat bastards who espoused the unethical, the immoral, and the inhumane. The history of quackery isn't a story of the medical establishment versus outsiders, but a hazy, amorphous cloud of conflicts between all manner of practitioners internal and external.

John Romulus Brinkley was a quack who bought his medical degree from the Kansas City Eclectic Medical University, a diploma mill, and claimed to cure all manner of ailments, principally impotence, by embedding a sliver of goat testicle inside the scrotum of the patient. John Elliotson was a respected doctor who pushed medicine towards the humane when he fell for the flattery of the narratives of mesmerism. Andrew Wakfield was a licensed physician who sold out his practice and accelerated a whole crank conspiracy implicating vaccines as the "cause" of autism in an attempt at pumping a patent for an alternative vaccine. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study knowingly, deceptively allowed Black patients

to deteriorate of syphilis for decades, even after it was discovered that penicillin was an effective treatment.

There are enough actual medical conspiracies that it becomes much easier to sell a fanciful version of a vast conspiracy to people who are already primed to adopt such a belief.

These quack practices are also extremely flexible, able to adapt quickly to changes in their surrounding language. Magnetism, for example, has never gone away. Not only does the concept of “realigning the body’s energy” show up in Reiki, the explicitly *magnetic* elements show up all over woo as well. In the 1990s my family was briefly recruited into an MLM hawking various curative magnetic products, ranging from bracelets to bed pads to massage balls to heavy slab magnets coated in blue rubber that you were meant to strap to any given injury using a tensor bandage. The pitch video promised that natural magnetic fields would help realign the body’s natural composition, ensuring everything from injuries healing faster to sleeping more deeply and waking more refreshed. It was all hogwash, of course, but fortunately we got out fairly quickly. And it turns out at the very least that having some large rubber-coated permanent magnets around the house is extremely useful when, say, a 12 year old tips an entire box of roofing nails over down onto the deck while helping re-shingle the house. Most quack products could only dream of being half as useful.

Like the hack screenwriter, many new-age “alternative” treatments leverage words like “quantum” as a science-themed stand-in for “magic.” The entirely unfounded claim of quantum healing, founded by serial grifter and master of technobabble Deepak Chopra, is that thoughts and prayers interact with the “quantum realm” and are thus the mechanism by which miracles are made scientific.

It is no surprise, then, that hypnosis, a technique that can be nominally learned in a matter of hours and requires no costly infrastructure or expendable resources on the part of the practitioner, provides a natural synergy for salesmen looking to exploit the market created by this psychology.

Why, one can without much effort even find all of this synthesized into new and interesting combinations like quantum hypnosis which, as you would expect, promises to let you “take control of your life, your health, and your body” and “use hypnosis to transform one's own body and the world within which it is situated.” How? Would you be shocked to learn that “the subconscious discovered through [quantum hypnosis] offers up visions of the client's past lives”?

Because it seems that you cannot spend any meaningful time looking into hypnotherapy without being told that fabricated memories, the product of a vivid and excited imagination, are supernatural glimpses into a realm beyond.

Incidentally it's worth noting that “past life regression”, despite its constant presence within the narrative of hypnosis since the 18th century, is continually reinvented independently by some new true believer every decade or so. These practitioners are not particularly inclined towards meaningful research, so remain unaware that these claims are over two hundred years old as they tell a story about how they or their mentor “discovered” the phenomenon, and upon hearing these bad/fake memories decided that someone was vividly recalling a previous life fighting and dying alongside free Black troops in the Civil War rather than fabricating a new memory based off a hazy recollection of once seeing *Glory* (1989) starring Matthew Broderick on iTV Sunday Night Movies in 1992 at the age of 9.

This then returns us to our central tension. If even “reputable” practitioners pay credence to “past life recall” and “birth

regression” more often than they reject new age woo, then is it *actually* unfair to dismiss hypnosis out of hand?

# HYPNOSIS THE ALL-POWERFUL

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Wendi Friesen is a hypnotherapist who has been practicing in one form or another since 1994 with a business based principally around her website wendi.com. Her practice has been featured, as she prominently advertises, on Showtime, HBO, Fox & Friends, and in publications like GQ, Men's Health, and The Washington Post. We're going to talk about her as a case study for a big chunk here not because she's some all-important figure, but because she is reasonably high profile and deeply prolific. With her long career she's had decades to amass a pretty substantial body of work, and thus a long list of claims about what hypnosis can do.

Of course what goes unremarked is that her appearance on Showtime was in the Hypnosis episode of Penn & Teller: Bullshit where she was excoriated for the actual products she did (and as of 2022 still does) offer. Wendi's self-description of her practice focuses, of course, on the retained, the plausible, the things that hypnosis might actually probably be effective for treating under the right conditions, like phobias and PTSD, with a sprinkling of the unrealistic, like chronic pain and migraines.

“My work with the medical hypnosis has freed people from chronic pain, ended debilitating phobias, released the effects of PTSD, ended the torture of relentless migraines, and cured many so called incurable conditions.”

However Wendi's vast library of product offerings is not nearly so restrained, including such products as a 12 lesson series *Living Large - Men's Enhancement and Growth* which promises to increase the size and power of your erection for

a mere \$69.90 (I see what you did there.) This penis enlargement hypno-tape is positioned right next to a 30 day breast enlargement regimen for a mere \$39.90, and a “remote seduction” course (\$44.90) promising “using hypnosis you will connect with the ability to affect and influence a situation.” The description of this course overtly evokes the same mysticism of Mesmer, suggesting that by mere power of thought the practitioner can alter the minds of others, implant ideas, and push towards suggestions.

“Can you create a connection across the room or across the country with only thought and desire? Some think you can.

Many people, who have used this, tell me they get almost instant results. Some say they get a phone call from a woman they haven't heard from in years. Others say they create a magnetic connection with a person in a bar. It is like a magnet that person comes to them.

I have used this method to pull people toward me, in airports, at conventions, and even from miles away.”

Via hypnosis, whether practiced on you the patient or by you the practitioner, you can, Wendi promises, master your body and make it heal fast or, after a mere \$39.00 fifteen-part hypnotic audio book, harness the power to Think and Grow Rich. \$49 for the Do It Now Live session will unlock the creative genius inside you. \$39 for the Luck of Your Life seminar will imbue you with the power to alter your luck. \$59 will allow you to flourish like a flower and unleash your creative genius via the course Creative Genius. For the gift of unlocking your psychic powers, learning to possibly even see *into the future*, \$49.90 seems like practically a steal.

Wendi offers no less than 153 lessons in weight loss ranging from the Weight Release Series to the Zen of Thin and the Appetite Zapper.

The subject of weight loss is already one that is the foundation of an entire vast industry of cure-alls, miracle fixes, rapid results, and over-hyped superfoods, a veritable grifter's paradise. The barrier to entry is practically non-existent, anyone can spin up a blog or a YouTube channel and become a "diet influencer" overnight. The actual science is vague, contested, and ultimately boring and simple (eat less, move more) leaving a huge gap for salespeople to offer emotionally or philosophically appealing answers, like ludicrous "paleolithic" diets that are little slim on their insect content to be authentically paleolithic and "raw" diets that reject the fact that *cooking food* is older than *homo sapiens* in order to appeal to a mythological "natural" or "pure" state of humanity.

It is, thus, no surprise that hypnosis so often intersects this same subject.

Now, to thread the needle on the subject, there are some dimensions of the broad subject in which psychotherapy, and thus forms of hypnotherapy, may be applicable. Disordered eating, food-related phobias, and similar psychological conditions are a situation where a person's internal framing of their relationship to the subject is the paramount issue, and reframing that relationship is thus valid. However given the number of habits, circumstances, and environmental factors that need to be adjusted in order to successfully lose significant amounts of weight, a *persuasive mindset* is ultimately so far down the list of impediments that there's basically no downside to deeply discounting it. As is basically always the case in habit reformation, the attitude of the people around you and the ability for your environment to support the new habit is the greatest dictator of success. If you are trying to quit smoking or change your diet it is exponentially more difficult if your family smokes or continues to eat your old diet, and exponentially easier if they don't. Access to quality food and appealing physical activities (most notably access to the *free time* needed to engage in



recreational physical activity) is likewise the actual biggest barrier and dictator of success. This is not to say that mindset is entirely irrelevant, but you will not Think Yourself Thin with a 7 day hypnotic infusion.

Wendi, of course, also offers courses on a classic of mesmerism, past life regression to “explore and heal your spiritual life.”

To lump this discussion in with another same-item-different-flavour-text offering, all forms of hypnotic regression, whether to last week, childhood, birth, or a past life, fall somewhere on the spectrum of “deeply unreliable” to “complete hogwash” to the point that any ethical practitioner would outright reject the use of hypnosis for memory recall in any situation that wasn’t immediately verifiable such as “where did I leave grandpa’s will?” or “what was the combination to my safe?” bits of information that are extremely compact and can be quickly checked for accuracy through direct action.

Likewise the use of hypnosis as a forensic tool is, for all intents and purposes, akin to police collaborating with a fortune-teller. Sure, police have used hypnosis as a forensic tool, but police are also themselves untrustworthy and do on occasion collaborate with fortune-tellers.

The problem is that the human memory is extremely plastic. Most experiences never form permanent memories, and our memories are heavily influenced by the collective framing of the others around us. A story about an event that happened during a party you were attending, but not in the same room as, can form just as potent a memory based off your friends’ retellings as though you had been a first-hand witness, with your brain taking the elements you are familiar with, the party itself and your friends, and extrapolating a memory from that.

The psychological trick that allows our brains to evaluate hypothetical scenarios, and thus attempt to predict the

outcomes of events, is the one that also enables us to form extremely convincing and entirely fabricated memories. People naturally implant false memories all the time as a result of half-remembered scenarios, small lies and fabrications told repeatedly, and dreams involving familiar people and places.

The hypnotic state, defined explicitly by the subject's suggestibility and marked by the capacity for the imagination to overwhelm even the empirical senses, is perhaps the least trustworthy state for memory recall possible. "Regressing" to the time of one's own birth is nothing more than an imagination exercise, the subject's brain taking what it knows about birthing and extrapolating a vivid scenario.

This is where things get dangerous. To return to Deidre Barrett briefly, "people come to hypnotherapy with similar complaints and hopes to those they bring to any treatment for physical or psychological problems." This is important to outline in the relationships at play here. The power dynamic "past life" or "birth" regression is playing with is rarely that of curiosity or a parlor trick, but people with significant issues that they are seeking explanation and remedy for. So the hazard here is not merely the risk of generating wholly confabulated memories in someone's mind while they're in a susceptible state, but implanting and hardening false memories as explanation for real problems the patient is dealing with, where the best outcome is a comforting lie, and the worst massively aggravates existing psychological damage.

In evaluating all these offerings it should go without saying that hypnosis is in no way capable of making your penis larger, nor can it grant you psychic powers. Hypnotic clairvoyance is just as false today as it was in 1838 when Elliotson had Elizabeth diagnose patients in the dead of night.

Of all the classic claims of sideshow mesmerists and occultists in the 19th century few, if any, have really gone away in any meaningful way. Even practitioners such as Wendi will indulge the fantasy that some mesmeric force projects from the hypnotist to the subject.

In researching all this I looked up hypnotherapists in my city, to try and get a sense of what they have on offer. The top result seems, at first glance, to be reasonably sensible, focusing on psychological staples like stress, anxiety, phobias, and addictions. She claims accreditation by the National Guild of Hypnotists as a Clinical Hypnotherapist and promotes that she is fully insured. “A Clinical Hypnotherapist is a mental health professional with extensive training and expertise in the clinical application of hypnosis in therapy.”

While things certainly cater to an aesthetic with a webpage evoking the word “healing” a lot, with photos of hands positioned as though they’re cupping the sun, a prominent disclaimer pronounces “These therapies are meant, in no way, to replace regular medical treatment, but rather to enhance that medical treatment.”

But scratch the surface and you find that Jenn is promising fertility enhancements, promoting “global psychic evolution” schemes like Psych-K, and offering past life regression. Scrolling down through her instructors we find none other than Wendi Friesen.

Once again the practice of hypnotherapy is largely hampered by hypnotherapists.

# A DEGREE IN HYPNOTHERAPY

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“Diploma mill” is the name typically applied to a business masquerading as an educational institution, but serving largely as an a la carte shop for credentials. The gradient of these orgs varies widely, from schools that otherwise look and function as schools with a small but real campus building and some identifiable faculty but *permissively* easy course material, to online “life experience” colleges that will award you with whatever degree you want after you write a short and unimportant essay explaining why you deserve it and pay them \$500. The cost difference is basically delineated by how trivial you would like it to be to uncover the fraudulence of your credentials.

As my own career has increasingly involved investigating people posing as experts I’ve naturally come across a reliable number of people with extremely sketchy degrees. Robert Sungenis, a Trad-Cath philosopher and proponent of a geocentric model of the universe, produced the pro-geocentrism film *The Principle* (2014) which I covered in some detail in a 2020 video essay. As part of that essay and the research for it I dug into Sungenis’ credentials which turned out to be rather suspect all things considered. Sungenis’ pinnacle degree, his doctorate in Religious Studies, came from a diploma mill styled Calamus International University registered in the Republic of Vanuatu.

(This is another reliable indicator: distance learning, English-speaking “higher education” institutions that are clearly targeting Westerners but are based out of small island nations like Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. Not to speak ill of the wonderful people and cultures in these nations, these “schools” are almost always the

construct of Western grifters seeking favourable taxes and lax regulation, and since the grift amounts to little more than a business license and an empty office rental what concern of the locals is it if some white guys want to throw some money away?)

Calamus' now-defunct website gave the game away pretty readily. The faculty profile page had never once been updated beyond "coming soon" and the front page news was perpetually months or years out of date.

I came down pretty hard on this point in my video, mocking not only the fact that Sungenis got his degree from such an obvious diploma mill but that one of his three doctoral advisors, Robert Bennett, is his friend, political collaborator, and co-author, and another, Morris Berg, has a "doctorate" in hypnotherapy from "overseas universities" in addition to his credentials as a certified past-life healer, registered metaphysician, and EFT Energy Master from the Guild of Energists, who are a whole spectacular can of pseudoscientific worms in their own right. In my video I dismissed Berg as a quack essentially out of hand, treating it as effectively self-evident that a degree in hypnotherapy was garbage, to which I received some of the pushback that has led me to be inclined to write this book, however given the weight of the evidence as a whole, especially Dr. Berg's qualifications as a collective, I'm afraid that the willingness of practitioners to cozy up to any other pseudoscientific quasi-therapy "system" reflects poorly on hypnotherapy as practiced in reality. Berg's qualifications are, of course, all nonsense, but you can see the clear pattern: certified, registered, guild. All of these junk credentials are structured to mimic the form and format of legitimacy and prestige, sometimes out of deliberate deception, sometimes out of pure wishful thinking on the part of the true-believer founders who are honestly convinced that they've unlocked some new science.

The quantum hypnotist from chapter 6 is, of course, “trained and certified.” (And, naturally, a Reiki master/teacher)

(And, once again, none of this is new. If you’ll recall from chapter 2, Mesmer himself set up his own version of this in the 1780s with the Society of Universal Harmony.)

This is a good illustration of the higher end of the diploma mill ecosystem, where some actual humans with questionable credentials help build out the smokescreen to make the scam look slightly more credible by attaching names and faces to the operation. In contrast to “life experience” colleges which will mail you a degree for a couple hundred dollars, these diploma mills tend to be pretty pricey, with their spurious degrees costing orders of magnitude more and requiring some actual course work, albeit a fraction of what would be involved (both time and money) in an equivalent degree from an actual institution.

Robert Sungenis, in an otherwise mind-numbingly boring reply to my video, contested my evaluation of the quality of his degree. While he made no real attempt to defend against the fact that Calamus is now defunct, or the characterization of the institution as a diploma mill, he did argue that he had tried to start the degree elsewhere but had to finish it via Calamus owing to the time commitment involved in raising his eleven children.

Which, I will give the man his due: although he didn’t phrase it in these terms “I had to buy a fake degree because I was too busy f---ing my wife” is easily the strongest counterargument I’ve received in my career.

But this is the ecosystem that the vast majority of hypnotherapy credentials come out of, and Morris Berg is a nice little encapsulation of that. Whatever Berg’s legitimate practices and training are, it has clearly been compounded with a vast array of crank-magnetic craft. Positioning

hypnotherapy next to the Guild of Energists and past-life healing not only makes them look equivalent in their (lack of) value, it also materially draws them closer together. The thought processes, philosophies, worldviews, practices, and ecosystems cross-pollinate, and the willingness to entertain such a wide variety of crank ideas speaks to a fundamental credulousness amongst practitioners.

A particular feature, which we see in the career of Dr. Berg, is an excessive collection of titles and credentials, a performance of over-qualification. A common element of crank ecosystems, even ones based on some nugget of actual science, is over-awarding, handing out plaques and titles and certificates and awards for every weekend retreat, three day intensive, and middling performance milestone to ensure that practitioners have lots and lots of important looking *stuff* to put on the walls of their office to woo and impress clients. It's important to consider that awards are, as a baseline, mostly fake and worthless, even the prestigious ones, and it's all downhill from there. (Kenny G, the musician, somewhat famously values his 2001 Pro-Am golf trophy more than his 1994 Grammy, because "to win a golf trophy you actually need to win the game")

This is an approach informed not by the reality of what it takes to learn and master complex information, but a performance of qualification, a ritualization of the outwards aesthetic while bypassing the thing that the aesthetic typically signifies: time and effort.

The National Guild of Hypnotists is the preeminent international organization that serves as a professional locus for the practice of hypnosis and professional hypnotism, predominantly clinical but including some stage hypnotists in their events and conferences. Founded in 1950 by Dr. Rexford L. North they are considered to be reasonably reputable. They have been recognized by the US Congress for their efforts towards establishing and maintaining a professional

code of ethics for clinical practitioners. Their website is generally free of lotus flowers, rainbows, stock photos of water, and other common New Age iconography. They are, at a glance, above board.

The devil, however, lives in the details.

The National Guild of Hypnotists is principally concerned with image management rather than rigor and science. Overt New Age woo, spirit seances, and hypnotic clairvoyance aren't bad for the practice of hypnotism because they're fake, but because they're bad for PR. The NGH will still platform speakers presenting on past life regression, "birth trauma" (the idea that adult dysfunctions are the result of psychological trauma incurred during birth), and using hypnosis to stimulate fertility. Members are in no meaningful way censured for advertising training with known quacks offering penis enlargement hypnosis.

While the Guild's code of ethics and standards covers generally sensible practices like truth in advertising, prioritizing client safety and welfare, and keeping their practice within the limits of their training and competence (a nice sentiment, but toothless given that the least competent at practice will also be the least competent at self-evaluating their competence), the thrust of the ethics statement is "don't get in trouble with medical regulations" and "do not speak poorly of other hypnotists."

The code of ethics plays coy with the subject of age regression and forensics, stating that they "shall be used only by those who have had additional training in these specific fields of study" but otherwise taking no stand on the efficacy of the procedures.

Probably the most damning concession of hypnotism's actual therapeutic efficacy is contained within this code of ethics.



**“Reasonable Practice:** Members shall withhold non-referred hypnotic services if a client’s behavior, appearance or statements would lead a reasonable person to believe that the client should be evaluated by a licensed health care professional. Members shall provide services to such clients only after evaluation and with the approval of the licensed health care professional.”

This outright limits the practice of hypnosis to things that just don’t really matter in the scheme of things, a potentiator of marginal issues with willpower but little else barring specific scenarios, a limp admission that it’s all just not that powerful.

Whatever the founding ideology, the ultimate purpose of the NGH is to protect the business interests of their members. While they take a stand against the *tacky*, they are ultimately shy about rooting out woo because woo is where the money is.

If you read the biographies of a lot of hypnotherapists you start to see common, recurring patterns in their stories.

“I was a stay-at-home mom entering middle age and frustrated with where my life was going. I realized that what I wanted inside was to *heal*.”

“I was a hustle-and-grind cubicle worker in sales and frustrated with where my life was going. I realized that what I wanted inside was to *heal*.”

A huge, huge swath of practitioners come to hypnotherapy in their 30s and 40s as a pivot from some other unfulfilling career. This is also the story of how a lot of people end up hawking homeopathic cures, aromatherapy, magnetic bracelets, tarot, and similar “wellness” related schemes, scams, and operations.

The motivations here are complex and not without a sympathetic vein. Basically you have someone who is frustrated with where their life is going, they want to make a change, but owing to circumstances and the structuring of our society they lack the resources (time and material) to make a meaningful course change. Hypnosis, homeopathy, reiki, life coaching, crystal healing, aromatherapy, and the like, however, don't have particularly demanding onboarding by comparison to starting a nursing career from scratch at 35 or going to a trade school to become an apprentice electrician at 40.

They are all just a few months of training away at the "low" cost of a few thousand dollars from any of hundreds upon hundreds of online certification pipelines. In no time flat you can completely rebuild your life, empower yourself, be your own boss, work your own hours, do what you want to do, and become a *healer*. Of course the competition in providing these services is always fierce, owing to these low barriers of entry, so it's always wise to diversify the business by offering training as well.

"You can get certified in hypnotherapy without having to go to university and study for years in order to learn the required skills to work as a hypnotherapist.

The main difference between traditional hypnotherapy schools and revolutionary new hypnotherapy courses such as Rapid Transformational Therapy® (RTT®) is that conventional schools require years of studies before you become certified.

Courses such as RTT® however, offer you the chance to learn the necessary skills in the shortest amount of time. You can receive your hypnosis certificate and start practicing hypnotherapy much sooner."

This is from the website of hypnotherapist Marissa Peer, self-styled "celebrity hypnotist" who advertises training courses

that are so coy about the price that I needed to arrange a phone call with a “consultant” (salesperson) to even glimpse the price.

That price, it turns out, is in excess of ten thousand USD, and will only be revealed after patiently sitting through a trust-structuring pitch where the salesperson establishes a number of values (helping people is good, this therapy technique would help you help people, in fact in the process of learning this technique you will be practiced on which will basically cure you of your problems as a bonus, you could make money as a registered RTT® practitioner, this would change your life) before coming in with the pitch “don’t you agree that those things are worth way more than \$10,000?”

Marisa’s whole practice revolves around lofty claims of efficacy, though this should be taken with a pretty substantial grain of salt. The mythmaking biography she presents is as a therapist who went from specializing in eating disorders to a guru who unlocked the secret of a new, innovative synthesis approach to therapy she calls Rapid Transformational Therapy®, or RTT® (the registered trademark symbol is extremely important). The claims of efficacy are lofty, as the “RTT® method is different to other therapy techniques, such as CBT and talk therapy, because it achieves outstanding results very quickly” and “offers a comprehensive range of transformational techniques, including command therapy, to activate the body’s innate ability to heal and restore itself to wellness from a cellular level.”

But there’s a pretty big caveat which you’ll find in the disclaimer.

“Regression therapy is an approach to treatment that focuses on resolving significant past events believed to be interfering with a person’s present mental and emotional wellness. Only people with sound mental health who are confident that a review of past events

will not adversely impact their emotional or mental health should participate. We request that you do not participate in regression therapy if you or your treating practitioners have any past or existing concerns about your mental health.”

So she’s pitching a form of therapy that is only recommended for “people with sound mental health,” which would make it not so much *therapy* as vanity life coaching. This then feeds back into the claims of how well it works, the extremely high success rate, which is goosed by only taking on the easiest clients. Marisa’s website makes daunting claims about being the therapist to CEOs, Oscar-nominated actors, and high-performing athletes, which is a claim that is meant to wow the audience, as though she is able to deal with the (implicitly) complex minds of these powerful people and their inscrutable problems, but it crumbles on deeper interrogation. These are not clients with a deep psychological injury and the lack of resources to deal with them, they’re wealthy and successful people with vast resources and privileges. Most of their problems don’t exist, because they have the wealth to simply isolate themselves from stress.

Performance anxiety amongst the wealthy is not the same as existential trauma amongst the rest of us.

But it sounds impressive, no?

Indeed, as is a recurring theme in all these spaces, Marisa’s business isn’t so much that of performing hypnotherapy, but selling seminars.

As *The Times* put it in a May, 2021 profile written by Shanti Das “celebrity therapist Marisa Peer makes millions from ‘dangerous’ therapy— a self-help guru with no proper medical qualifications has trained others to use a technique that ‘breaks’ clients.”

It's also worth pointing out that, like many grifters, Marisa Peer (or, rather, the business that shares names with Marisa Peer) is incredibly thin-skinned, with accounts on virtually every forum responding to negative comments for months, if not years after initial posting. Reddit threads from three to four years ago have arguments between replies and u/MarisaPeer that are only a few months old. Based on reviews of the RTT® program, in particularly the shoddy customer support, lack of communication, hidden fees, and difficulty getting in touch with a human when problems need to be sorted out, the clear priority is not running a functioning academic program but managing image and SEO via constant name-searching.

All of this interlinks: the compliant professional organizations buoy up avaricious operators who sell bunk credentials to people who either become part of the grift themselves (which is the only way to directly recoup one's losses) or else remain merely victims. The whole of it is so toxic on net that it's entirely fair to dismiss "a degree in hypnotherapy" out of hand, and even consider one from not-wholly-fraudulent institutions to be suspect or at the very least of less value than it is almost certainly being ascribed.

Put another way: qualified therapists don't get higher degrees specifically in hypnosis, they get degrees in therapy and medicine of which hypnosis forms a part of their practice. The "doctor of hypnotherapy" is much like someone posturing as a scientist and hyping up their "chemistry degree" as an appeal to their authority in order to sell you a product hoping that you won't notice they have a Bachelor of Arts in Chemistry and no laboratory experience rather than a Bachelor of Science.

# SELF-HYPNOSIS

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Self-hypnosis is where all of the complexities and problems that we've struggled with in this book all come to a meeting point. Is self-hypnosis "real" in the sense that there's a hypnotized state that can be self-induced? Yes. Is "self-hypnosis" real in the sense that all the things described as self-hypnosis or all the cures attributed to self-hypnosis are factual? Well, that's an answer somewhere between a drawn-out, keening "eeeeeeh?" and an overt "no."

If Amazon and Audible are to be believed self-hypnosis can be used to address virtually any problem a human could possibly experience, though most of the products sold as self-hypnosis are somewhat more accurately recording-guided hypnosis. Wendi Friesen's practice, detailed in Chapter 7, is overwhelmingly dominated by sale of pre-recorded audio rather than direct interaction.

So this is largely an irrelevant distinction, but broadly "self-hypnosis" more often than not refers to these products more than any other modality.

While self-hypnosis tapes are the bread and butter of many practitioners, they are but a slice of the total volume of what is available out there. A practitioner is effectively an influencer, a content creator, a name-brand that their specific work gets tied to, but the bulk of what is now available on the internet comes from no one in particular, tons of it churned out by ghostwriters working for pennies (or less) per word, hired by grifters looking to game the storing algorithms of online storefronts, dumped onto the market under a dozen different pseudonyms.

For the shamelessness which the likes of Wendi Friesen and Marisa Peer indulge in, they do still consider their reputation when making promises.

With a lack of reputation at stake the lid comes off on what the anonymous authors are willing to promise.

Weight loss hypnosis. *Rapid* weight loss hypnosis. *Extreme* weight loss hypnosis. Mind control. Winning lottery affirmations. Attract financial success. Make a guy love you. Relive past lives. Be the alpha males. Increase your intelligence. Become a law of attraction magnet. Unlock clairvoyance and psychic powers. Remote viewing affirmations. Deep sleep and rapid weight loss: meditation made effortless. Lose weight fast with hypnosis in under an hour. Subliminal ultimate wealth, money, and abundance. Train your brain to learn astral projection.

A big part of this is that self-hypnosis is a popular subject to target for “hustle culture” influencers. The Mikkelsen Twins, operators of AIA, a grift that will train you how to start your own content mill grift, recommend targeting hypnosis, weight loss, and new age (if not some intersection of all three) because they’re high performing categories relative to the low quality expectations. Any product about hypnosis can be effortlessly padded with lengthy explanations of what hypnosis is, what it isn’t, common misconceptions (as though those are different), some interesting historical facts (Mesmer was kinda weird!), and a lengthy set of sample scripts. Their recommended target is 25,000 words, which translates to a 3 hour audio book, which is just a process of min-maxing Amazon’s reward system versus the amount of content that actually needs to be produced.

This leads to an absolute glut of product flooding markets with barely-strung-together audiobooks written by underpaid ghostwriters working on demanding deadlines who can’t

afford to indulge curiosity, all cribbing notes from the same easily accessed sources.

Self-hypnosis forms the backbone of an almost pristine grift for the simple fact that you can instruct the user to play the tape while they are asleep, which is just truly beautiful as an exit ramp from the need to commit any real effort. Of course, as we've seen, hypnosis and sleep are only aesthetically related, a hypnotized individual is still very much conscious even if the word "sleep" and "sleepy" are used so very often in inductions. The efficacy of any product claiming to utilize hypnosis in order to train your brain while you are asleep is effectively nil. If true hypnosis is a harnessing of the placebo effect then sleep-training hypnosis is the placebo for the placebo, with any positive results being self-reporting errors, a subject who amplifies otherwise normal fluctuations in their behavior because they are tuned in and seeking positive change.

On a harm-evaluation, most of these are focused on trivial personality traits and are so ineffective as to be functionally inert, and at the very least not actively harmful beyond the inherent exploitation of their existence. But, of course, once you insist that hypnosis can alter the behavior of your biology it's always a small hop from "hypnosis can make your penis larger" to "boost your immune system" to "fight your cancer."

To this end a more authentic, honest, and useful hypnotic experience is more likely to be found in a YouTube video titled "**\*ASMR\*** Daily Affirmations Dating Confidence You're Worth It [Compilation] [SFW]".





# CONCLUSION

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The more things change, the more they stay the same: in over two hundred years of modern practice hypnosis has never once been able to fully shake the trappings of faith healers, mesmerists, and quacks.

The underlying mechanism that binds stage hypnotism to hypnotherapy to spiritual trance remains elusive, and the debate over state versus non-state seems unlikely to end any time soon. The question “are stage hypnotism and therapeutic hypnosis even the same thing?” remains without an answer.

Learning about the subject in the course of writing this book has been deeply fascinating, there was a lot that I didn't expect (even if the broad conclusions aligned more with my preconceptions than I would have guessed), and some genuinely gripping stories from history. A thing that lingers with me is the plight of James Braid. At the risk of painting the man a tragic hero, he tried with fierce intent to create a solid break between mesmerism and hypnosis, between the supernatural and the quantifiable, and all for naught as the animal magnetists simply changed their vocabulary in step.

(Also to further dilute the narrative, while Braid remained interested in hypnosis until his sudden death in 1860 at the age of 64, the bulk of his life's work was as a practicing surgeon before and after the publication of *Neurohypnology*.)

This is ultimately the sad reality, for regardless of whatever benefits hypnosis does have the principle application has been as a vehicle for targeting the desperate, whether it be someone who feels trapped in their career buying a ten

thousand dollar online training course or someone seeking relief from a disease they can't afford to fight.

A common pitch of folk-healing is that it is marginalized by the establishment because "it's *too* free," that the establishment, the *system*, is afraid of cures that are abundant, that are freely available, that are open to anyone to grasp and apply. There is certainly more than zero merit to that idea, there are definitely elements of our systems, medical and financial, that oppose the freely available, but the full scope is far more complex for the simple fact that that rhetoric is so easily employed to *also sell something*. That the product is a book or an audio cassette or a seminar or a retreat rather than a pill or an ointment is at best aesthetic (and more often than not the "natural" healer is more than willing to sell you a pill or an ointment anyway.) Not only is it used to sell stuff, it's used to insulate from and explain away criticism.

Of course **they** would tell you homeopathy is bad, the pitch goes, they're afraid of the competition.

In this regard it is easier, if not trivial, for "open source" techniques to be utilized first and foremost by the clumsy, the unethical, the unskilled, and the conspiratorial. "If hypnosis is on the fringes of medicine," the story goes, "it must not be because of its limitations in application and effect, but because it is *too* effective." The marginalization due to ineffectiveness becomes itself rhetorically employed as evidence of potency.

It is an eternally effective story. You can plop a grifter down anywhere in human history and they will be able to find an audience and turn a buck off a narrative of some technique, some trick, some unguent or tincture that will cure ailments of the body and spirit for a low, low price, and the only reason you haven't heard of it before is because it's so cheap that it threatens the balance of power.

So too it goes with hypnosis, an interesting quirk of the human psyche, a non-invasive technique with some interesting therapeutic applications, mired in centuries of self-inflicted superstition.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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