

James Braid & The Discovery of Hypnotism

This story, from the memoirs of Dr. Williamson, Professor of Natural History at Owens College, Manchester, is quoted by the hypnotist Milne Bramwell. Dr. Williamson was there to observe the historic incident that inspired James Braid to develop his theory of hypnotism in opposition to the "animal magnetism" of Mesmer.

During the fourth decade of this century the subject of clairvoyance had been much discussed in social circles, and in the early days of my professional life two men who lectured on the subject visited Manchester. The first of these was a Frenchman, who illustrated his lecture by experiments on a young woman. [The Mesmerist, Charles Lafontaine, was actually Swiss.] At one of his lectures the girl was declared to be in a state of sound [Mesmeric] sleep. A considerable number of medical men were present, including our leading ophthalmist, Mr. Wilson, and one Mr. Braid. The latter gentleman was loud in his denunciation of the whole affair. The audience then called upon Mr. Wilson for his opinion of the exhibition. Of course the question was, 'Is this exhibition an honest one or is it a sham?' 'Is the girl really asleep, or is she only pretending to be so?' In reply to the call of the audience, Mr. Wilson stood up and said: 'The whole affair is as complete a piece of humbug as I have ever witnessed.' The indignant lecturer, not familiar with English slang phrases, excitedly replied: 'The gentleman says it is all *Bog*; I say it is not *Bog*; there is no *Bog* in it at all.' By this time several of us, including Mr. Wilson, had gone upon the platform to examine the girl. I at once raised her eyelids, and found the pupils contracted to two small points. [In fact, the pupils normally dilate during hypnosis, but the opposite can happen.] I called Wilson's attention to this evidence of sound sleep, and he at once gave me a look and a low whistle, conscious that he was in a mess. Braid then tested the girl by forcing a pin between one of her nails and the end of her finger. She did not exhibit the slightest indication of feeling pain, and Braid soon arrived at the conclusion that it was not all 'Bog.'

He subsequently commenced a long series of elaborate experiments, which ended in his placing the subject on a more philosophical basis than had been done by any of his predecessors. For the term 'Animal Magnetism' and other popular phrases, Braid substituted 'Hypnotism' and 'Monoidealism.'

The hypothesis which he adopted was that the subjects of these experiments required to have their mental faculties concentrated upon one idea; this accomplished, two effects will be produced in a few moments. The first is a state of sound sleep, which he succeeded in obtaining through either of the several senses, sight, hearing, or touch; but his favourite plan was to seat the individual operated upon in an arm-chair, whilst he held a bright silver object, usually his lancet case, a few inches above the person's eyebrows, and required him to raise his eyes upwards until he saw the shining metal, soon after doing which, the patient went off into a sound sleep. But a still more remarkable result followed, indicating a condition of mind not so easily explained as illustrated.

On one occasion I called Braid in to see a young lad who had been suffering fearfully from a succession of epileptic attacks, which had failed to yield to medical treatment. So far as the epilepsy was concerned the hypnotic treatment was a perfect success; the boy, after having long endured numerous daily attacks, was perfectly relieved after the third day's hypnotic operation. For five subsequent years, during which the youth remained under my observation, the epilepsy did not return.

Braid always awoke his subjects from their hypnotic condition by sharply clapping his hands close the sleepers' ears, which at once aroused them. One day, before doing this, Braid said to me, 'I will now show you another effect of hypnotism. Lend me your pocket-book and pencil.' I did so. He then paced the book in the boy's left hand, which he raised into a convenient position in front of the lad's breast. My pencil was placed in his right hand, which was lifted into such a position that the point of the pencil rested upon one of the pages of the book. This attitude was rigidly maintained until Braid whispered in his ear: 'Write your name and address.' The lad did so: 'John Ellis, Lloyd Street, Manchester.' This done, the book and pencil were restored to my pocket. Braid then awoke the boy and asked, 'John, what were you doing just now?' He looked about rather wildly for a moment, and persistently answered, 'Nothing.' Braid then sent him off to sleep again. The question was again asked: 'John, what were you doing just now?' The lad answered promptly, but in a low voice: 'Writing my name and address.' A succession of similar experiments clearly indicated two things: first, that a mesmerised individual would do what he was told to do; second, that things done when in that state were remembered only when the same condition was resumed; otherwise they were forgotten, indicating a *dual state of mind*, which, so far as I know, has not yet been satisfactorily explained. [However, Liébault, another great Victorian hypnotist, only reported complete spontaneous amnesia in 13% of cases, and modern researchers find it even less common.] I cannot learn that Braid's method of experimental inquiry and of philosophical induction has been continued by any person since he died.