

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: THE FIRST PARAPSYCHOLOGIST AND HIS CREATION OF THE BLIND PROTOCOL

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Abstract

This paper describes the first reported blind protocol, which was devised by Croesus, King of the Lydians (BCE 560-547) and reported by Herodotus (BCE 484 - 424). It was used in the first Remote Viewing experiment to enter the historical record. The next documented use of a blind protocol occurred in 1784, when it was explicitly employed in the interest of science, and its history as a research technique begins. King Louis the XVIth's created a commission to evaluate Friedrich Anton Mesmer's claims concerning healing through "animal magnetism", administered while people were in a trance. Franklin was asked to be the commission's head. The paper argues that Mesmer was probably looking for a scientific model to explain what he was observing, and settled on the, then, fashionable alchemical idea of "animal magnetism." Mesmer could not practice medicine, so his claims were represented by his colleague, d'Eslon, a licensed physician. Franklin could not attend the commission's early efforts, which failed, so he arranged a series of experiments conducted in his house in Passy. To do them, Franklin created the blind protocol to answer the king's question as to whether or not "animal magnetism" was real. Franklin literally blind-folded recipients of d'Eslon treatments, which is why the protocol came to be called "blind". These experiments also included a demographic variable in the experiment design. Franklin also conceived an experiment incorporating not only blindness but "treated" and "control" populations, in which d'Eslon attempted to "magnetize" a tree. A blindfolded boy could not distinguish three control trees from a treated tree. The commission concluded "animal magnetism" did not exist, but was at pains to acknowledge that something had occurred. Franklin commented on the psycho-physiological implications. But only the headline was remembered and the development of hypnotism, and psychosomatic medicine, would be crippled for half a century, an unintended consequence of Mesmer's linking them to animal magnetism. Although Mesmerism died out in France, the English surgeon John Eliotson (1791-1868) apparently saw through Mesmer's explanatory model to the psycho-physical self-regulation in the form of hypnosis that was Mesmer's real discovery. He seems to have avoided all attempts at explaining how it worked, but conducted a considerable number of surgeries using hypnosis as the anesthetic, anticipating its usage in this capacity a century later. So great was the disapproval of Mesmer, however, that no one seems to have gotten Eliotson's point. Franklin's protocol, however, rapidly became the gold standard of science, and he the first parapsychologist.

Two populations, one receiving the real medicine, and the other one a sugar pill placebo, with both researchers and patients blind to which is which. Such protocols are important because what a researcher wants or expects can influence what they observe, or how they interpret what their experiment's data is saying. If no one knows which is which until the data collection and analysis are completed then that potential for bias is eliminated. This is why the blind protocol has become a critical part of modern science and the gold standard for research in the life sciences. But where did this idea begin?

Herodotus of Halicarnassus (BCE 484 - 424) , a Greek man of letters whose vivid accounts have earned him immortality is where the historical record begins.¹ He describes how a wily Lydian King, whose name to this day is associated with great wealth – Croesus (BCE 560 to 547) -- carried out the first experiment. Croesus had lost his son, and was in deep depression when his mourning was interrupted by the news that he might be attacked by the Persians. He wanted to consult an oracle to tell him what to do. But which one could he trust?

The solution Croesus devised was both a blind protocol experiment and the first description of what today would be known as a Remote Viewing experiment. He sent out couriers to all the famous oracles of his day. To the Greek oracles he sent delegations to Delphi, to Abae in Phocis, to Dodona, to the oracle of Amphiaraus; to Trophonius; and another to Branchidae in Milesia. To Libya, which was then considered part of Asia, he sent another embassy, to consult the oracle of Ammon at Siwah in the Libyan desert.²

All of these messengers were given an identical task. “They were to keep count of the days from the time of their leaving Sardis, and, reckoning from that date, on the hundredth day they were to consult the oracles, and to inquire of them what Croesus the son of Alyattes, king of Lydia, was doing at that moment. The answers given them were to be taken down in writing, and brought back to him.”³

None of the replies survive except that of the oracle at Delphi recorded by Herodotus.

Following their king's instructions the Lydians waited until the 100th day. No sooner had they entered the sanctuary, even before they could ask their question the Pythoness, as, the entranced young woman within was known, answered it in hexameter verse:

*I can count the sands, and I can measure the ocean;
I have ears for the silent, and know what the dumb man meaneth;
Lo! on my sense there striketh the smell of a shell-covered
tortoise,
Boiling now on a fire, with the flesh of a lamb, in a cauldron-
Brass is the vessel below, and brass the cover above it.*⁴

Even though it sounded like gibberish, the Lydian embassy faithfully wrote it down and set off for Sardis to report to Croesus.

Herodotus says, “When all the messengers had come back with the answers which they had received, Croesus undid the rolls, and read what was written in each. Only one approved itself to him, that of the Delphic oracle. This he had no sooner heard than he instantly made an act of adoration, and accepted it as true, declaring that the Delphic was the only really oracular shrine.”⁵

Croesus in stipulating 100 days had set up an experiment, one little different than such blind protocols today. The messengers would not know the answer, nor could the oracle.

“He set himself to think what was most impossible for any one to conceive of his doing, and then, waiting till the day agreed on came, he acted as he had determined. He took a tortoise and a lamb, and cutting them in pieces with his own hands, boiled them both together in a brazen cauldron, covered over with a lid which was also of brass.”⁶

Croesus had all the right ideas on how to create a blind protocol, but his interests were hardly to serve the goals of science. That honor and the beginnings of the blind protocol as a research tool we almost certainly owe to Benjamin Franklin.

Today, we don't often think of Franklin's scientific research except in terms of his work on electricity. But if his electrical work, diplomacy, and Statesmanship did not overpower his other achievements, he would still be an historically significant individual for his work in a half a dozen other disciplines. He was the first meteorologist in America, the first geographer, the first oceanographer, an inventor of medical apparatus and, least known of all, the first parapsychologist - a discipline which studies extraordinary and anomalous human functioning.

In 1778, Franklin was in Paris, as America's Minister Plenipotentiary to the court of King Louis XVI, when the 18th century's greatest medical rogue, Friedrich Anton Mesmer, came to the city from Vienna in a cloud of celebrity and controversy. Mesmer had left Vienna rather hurriedly. He had been asked to

treat Marie Paradies, a pianist who appears to have suffered from hysterical blindness. After receiving his treatment her eyesight was temporarily restored but the change was so overwhelming that it shattered her nerves and she lost the ability to play her instrument. Unhappily for Mesmer, Marie Paradies was the goddaughter of the Austro-Hungarian Empress, Maria Theresa, and she had taken umbrage at what had happened to her goddaughter. Mesmer had prudently decamped Vienna for Paris, which is where he encountered Franklin.

Well-trained in both medicine and theology, Mesmer was a charming, rational, cultivated man who was admired by people like Mozart whom he commissioned several times to write special musical pieces. Like Franklin, and Mozart, and many of the aristocracy, Mesmer was also a Freemason, then the mark of a man of character. But he also had a flamboyantly theatrical style, more than a pinch of the con, startling theories of illness, and disturbing and erotically tinged methods of treatment. Larger than life he surfed controversy like a wave.

He treated his patients, known as *somnambule*, described by one observer as mostly “hysterical bourgeois women,” in groups, during “magnetic seances”. Like many intellectuals of the 18th century, particularly those involved with Freemasonry, Mesmer was interested in alchemy and astrology and that may be why he cloaked his treatments in the symbols of these already contested fields. The *somnambule* sat holding hands around a large wooden tub filled with powdered glass and magnetized iron filings. They were relaxed and brought into *rapport* by the sweet haunting tones of the armonica, a glass instrument whose invention, coincidentally, was another Franklin achievement. The armonica was played from behind a curtain covered with astrological symbols, and produced ethereal sounds that were the 18th century’s equivalent of modern electronic consciousness music. At this point Mesmer, cloaked by a long purple robe, would enter. In a performance that was a cross between a modern entertainment hypnotist and a stage magician, he would take the *somnambule* down into a deep trance and give them healing suggestions. Then he would touch them with a white metal wand, sometime rub them, frequently on “the lower abdomen”, then command them to awaken rested and cured. It frequently worked, although not for the reasons Mesmer claimed, and this success made Mesmer popular with lay people, and feared by the medical establishment.

How Mesmer discovered the fundamentals of hypnotism, and stumbled onto the rudiments of the psycho-physical self-regulation which lies at the core of such modern treatments as psychotherapy, hypnotism, and bio-feedback is unknown. It may be that he just observed the anesthesia a relaxed trance state produced, and the physiological control it gave subjects over their bodies and minds. However it happened, he seems to have sincerely believed he had stumbled onto

the cure for all illnesses.

Mesmer, it is also clear had no real insight into why the trances worked but, he understood from the very beginning of his career in medicine that he needed an explanatory model, and ostensibly attempted to construct one in his doctoral dissertation *De Planetarium Influxu* (On the Influence of the Planets), written in fulfillment of his degree for the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Vienna, which he published in 1766. In its 48 pages he connected hypnotism, a kind of primitive description of cycles in the biosphere (frequently mistakenly described by modern commentators as astrology), electricity, magnetism, and even a variant on Newton's recently described gravity; what he would later call *gravitas animalis* or *magnetismus animalis* – animal magnetism. It gave the effects he achieved a certain gloss, electricity, magnetism, and gravity being amongst the highest scientific issues of the day. And we now know where he got the idea for all this. He plagiarized it from one of the most prominent and well-regarded English physicians of the previous generation, Richard Meade (1673-1754).⁷ Mesmer's *De Planetarium Influxu* bears a more than coincidental – indeed, portions are virtually verbatim -- resemblance to the 1746 revised edition of Mead's 1704 book, *De Imperio Solis ac Lunae in Corpora Humana et Morbis inde Oriundis* (On the influence of the Sun and Moon upon Human Bodies and the Diseases Arising Therefrom).

Extending an alchemical belief, another fashionable subject in which he had an interest, Mesmer proposed that there existed a universal “fluid” possessed by all living forms, and that it could flow from one organism to another to the end of manipulating it to affect a patient's health. It would not be the first time an observable phenomena was linked to an absurd explanation and, as time went on, Mesmer became more and more invested in it, even as it made him more and more a pariah to the medical community.

When he arrived in Paris the French medical establishment, alarmed as much by his entrepreneurial success, as his unfounded theories, made it impossible for him to get a license to practice medicine in the city. Mesmer got around this by partnering with a disciple, the already medically licensed Charles D'Eslon.

As he had in Vienna, Mesmer was soon operating at the very height of the Parisian social pyramid, collecting followers that included the young French aristocrat, and American Revolutionary War hero, the Marquis de Lafayette, as well as no less a personage than the Queen, Marie Antoinette. He was lionized by the glamorous, and Mozart made references to Mesmer and his magnets as a plot device to cure one of his characters in the opera *Così fan Tutti*. So great was his popularity that the terminology of Mesmerism, as it came to be known, was

soon part of the language where it has remained to the present day -- his name gives us the verb to mesmerize.

By 1784, six years later, Mesmer felt secure enough to issue a subscription for shares to establish a hospital for animal magnetism treatments, and quickly raised 340,000 livres -- a prodigious sum for the times. This development, his ever greater fame, his hold on the Queen, and the constant lobbying against him by the established physicians who saw his aristocratic patronage as an economic threat to their own practices finally prompted King Louis to establish a commission to investigate his claims.

On the 12th of March 1784, four doctors from the Faculty of Paris were selected. One of them was Joseph-Ignace Guillotin. Although he did not invent it, he championed its use and his name that comes down to us because it is linked with the only form of state sponsored legal killing associated with a single country -- France and the guillotine.

The four doctors asked that the Academy of Sciences provide scientists to augment their number, and five were chosen, including Lavoisier the discoverer of oxygen, Franklin, known through the world then as the man who discovered electricity. The king asked Franklin to be the commission's head.

He was now arguably the most famous man in the western world. When Jefferson went to Paris to replace him, he wrote of his friend and mentor, the man with whom he had written the Declaration of Independence, that "more respect and veneration (was) attached to the character of Dr. Franklin than to that of any other person, foreign or native."⁸ He was also a man who lived in considerable pain. He suffered from gout, boils, and 80 years of hard living, and was mostly confined to his house in Passy, a mile from Paris and seven from king's seat at Versailles. Why he took the assignment is not clear. It may be he felt obligated to the king. He had just talked Louis, the most autocratic and traditional monarch in Europe, into funding a war of liberation fought by the most revolutionary democracy in the world, at a time when France's financial situation was far from sanguine. Or it may be that whatever the condition of his body, his mind and his curiosity were as wide ranging as ever.

One thing is certain. As was usually the case, Franklin saw deeper into the matter than anyone else, and wrote what may be the first recorded commentary on hypochondria and psychosomatic medicine. On March 19, before the commission formally began its work he said, "delusion may, however, in some cases be of use while it lasts. There are in every great rich city a number of persons who are never in health because they are fond of medicines and always

taking them whereby they derange the natural functions and hurt their constitutions. If these people can be persuaded to forbear their drugs in expectation of being cured by only a physician's finger or an iron rod pointing at them, they may possibly find good effects through they mistake the cause."⁹

Franklin was not up to travelling when the commission began, so the initial meetings were held without him, and without his guidance as to how such an evaluation should be undertaken. Since Mesmer himself could not practice medicine, the members went to d'Eslon's clinic where they found a handsome dimly lit room in the center of which was a large wooden tub filled with iron filings. In place of Mesmer's armonica, a pianoforte off to one corner provided a musical background. The patients were seated on chairs around the tub, linked together by cords, each holding their neighbor's thumb between their own thumb and first finger. From the tub long articulated iron rods projected, that could be touched to any part of a patient's body. D'Eslon explained to the commissioners that the tub was the condenser and conductor of the animal magnetism. As they watched he walked amongst the patients, touching one or another with a short iron rod, or rubbing his hands over their bodies, particularly the lower abdomen.¹⁰

The treatments went on for hours as the tension in the room grew. Nervous coughs, hiccups, hysterical cries, sobs, and even convulsions were observed and, d'Eslon told the observing commissioners, welcomed as signs that healing was taking place.¹¹ Nothing was controlled, and the commissioners left with no more sense of what had taken place medically than before they had come. After attending a number of these sessions, on the grounds that they might be disturbing the patients, the commissioners resolved to attend no further seances, and passed on their findings to Franklin.¹²

Franklin saw none of this as very useful. In the best tradition of extraordinary human performance research he might believe in reincarnation, practice meditation, and have an interest in the psychic, but he never confused interest with evidence.¹³ What was called for he realized was some kind of controlled protocol and in April he arranged for the other commissioners and d'Eslon to come to his home in Passy. In late April and early May, and at least once in June, they trooped out from Paris to gather at his house.¹⁴

On the theory that class and culture might explain what was happening, and to allow comparisons between populations, the first session at Passy involved only lower class patients, whose presence Franklin seems to have arranged. They included the asthmatic widow Saint-Amand; a woman named Anseune, who had a swollen thigh; six year old Claude Renard, scrofulous and tubercular;

Geneviève Leroux, who was nine and suffered from what was called St. Vitus's Dance; François Grenet, blind in his right eye from a tumor; a woman named Charpentier who had been thrown by a cow two years earlier and never fully recovered; and a man named Joseph Ennuyé, whose reason for being included is not given.¹⁵ After several hours, four of the seven were not affected at all by d'Eslon's treatments, those who were affected experienced mostly discomfort from having sore spots on their bodies pressed. No cures were achieved.

A few days later the commissioners arranged for four upper class people to be treated: Madame de Bory and Monsieur Romagni, who had no symptoms, of none listed, anyway; Monsieur Moret, who had a tumour on his knee' and Madame de V-----, who had some kind of nervous disorder. To this group was added, Franklin himself, his grandsons, his secretary, and an American officer who had called on Franklin, as well as a group of patients selected by d'Eslon from his Paris practice.¹⁶

Madame de Bory and M. Romagni, felt nothing during the treatment, nor did Franklin, the grandchildren, or the American officer. Madame de V----- almost fell asleep, although whether this was from hypnotism or treatment is unclear. The existing d'Eslon patients were more responsive, which was not surprising, and Franklin, then, suggested what became the first use of blindness in a medical experiment.

The d'Eslon patients were literally blindfolded -- which is why this protocol came to be known as "blind" -- and the treatments continued. As Franklin had hoped this was very revealing. They could not tell when they were being "magnetized", and often thought that they were when they were not, or weren't when they were.¹⁷

During another session at Franklin's house they went out into the garden. Mesmer maintained, as did d'Eslon, that any living thing could be magnetized, and he either volunteered or, more probably, Franklin asked for a demonstration. d'Eslon went over to an apricot tree in the garden and touched it with his wand, supposedly magnetizing it. He said that any one who touched the tree now would be affected. What is clear from all this is that d'Eslon was either a fool, or genuinely believed what he was saying was true. Otherwise why would he expose himself to ridicule? But Franklin, once again, saw the matter not as a question of belief but of evidence obtained under blind conditions.

D'Eslon was required to stand several yards from the tree.¹⁸ When he was in place a 12 year old boy was blindfolded with a bandage, and led out into the garden. He was taken to stand one by one in front of four trees, three controls

and the treated tree.¹⁹

At the first tree the boy began to perspire and cough. At the second tree he said he felt pain in his head, and languor in his body. At the third he said his headache was now much worse, and volunteered that he felt he was getting close to the magnetized tree. In fact he actually moving away from it. At the fourth tree he fainted, and was laid on Franklin's lawn, where d'Eslon revived him.²⁰

Franklin and the other members of the commission in attendance were satisfied that the experiments conducted at Franklin's house, under the conditions of blindness he had devised, had settled the question they had been asked as to whether animal magnetism was real. It was not.

On the 11th of August they issued their report to the king; it bore each of their signatures. They were unanimous. Benjamin Franklin's signature stood in first position, and such was his preeminence that throughout Europe and America scientists and lay people alike felt that it had been Franklin who had settled the issue. Mesmerism was dead, and Mesmer soon left Paris. He was lucky. Ten years later Lavoisier would lose his head to the guillotine, and Dr. Guillotin would just barely miss going under its blade. Mesmer would end up in Switzerland, where years later²¹ he died in obscurity and poverty.

The development of hypnotism, and psychosomatic medicine, and the mind-body issues that it raised, and that Franklin had commented on, would be crippled for half a century, an unintended consequence of Mesmer's linking them to animal magnetism.

Although Mesmerism died out in France, the English surgeon John Eliotson (1791-1868) remembered principally as the first physician in England to use the stethoscope, apparently saw through Mesmer's explanatory model to the deeper underlying principle of psycho-physical self regulation in the form of hypnosis that was Mesmer's real discovery. He seems to avoided all attempts at explaining how it worked, but conducted a considerable number of surgeries using hypnosis as the anesthetic, anticipating its usage in this capacity a century later. So great was the disapproval of Mesmer, however, that no one seems to have gotten Eliotson's point.

But the importance of Franklin's blind protocol was lost on no one, and from its 18th-century beginnings it has grown to become something every scientist in the world appreciates, and that largely determines what medicines we take, what chemicals can be used in our environment, and whether we can trust an experiment's results.

¹ *The Histories of Herodotus*. Trans. George Rawlinson. Ed. E.H. Blakeney. Intro. John Warrington. (Dent: London, 1949). Vol. 1 1:43--49

² *Ibid.*

³ *Loc cit.* 1:47

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Loc cit.* 1:48.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Frank A. Pattie. *Mesmer and Animal Magnetism: a chapter in the history of medicine*. (Edmonston Pub.: Hamilton, N.Y., 1994), pp. 13-27.

⁸ Jefferson VIII, 129.

⁹ Albert H. Smyth (ed.) *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*. Collected and edited with a life and introduction. 10 vols. (Macmillan: New York, 1905-7) . Vol. IX, pp. 182-83

¹⁰ Carl Van Doren. *Benjamin Franklin*. (Viking: New York, 1938). Pp. 714-717

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ I. Minis Hays (ed.) *Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin in the Library of the American Philosophical Society*. 5 vols. (American Philosophical Society: Philadelphia, 1908.) , vol. III, pp. 186-87, 196.

¹⁵ Hays III, p. 196.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Van Doren *Loc. Cit.*

¹⁸ *Rapport des Commissionaires Chargés par le Roi, de l'Examen du Magnetisme Animal*. Paris 1784. Pp. 19-37

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*