



BARON ÉTIENNE FÉLIX D'HÉNIN DE CUVILLERS AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN HYPNOSIS

By Brice Lemaire

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Introduction

This article traces the life, work, and fundamental contribution of Étienne Félix d'Hénin de Cuvillers (1755–1841), a largely unknown figure who is nevertheless considered central to the history of hypnosis. Through historical, philosophical, and scientific analysis, the author argues that Cuvillers is the true founder of modern hypnosis, long before the figures usually cited. His originality lies in his radical break with the theory of magnetic fluid and his emphasis on the imagination as the driving force behind hypnotic phenomena. The text shows how his work fits into the critical spirit of the Enlightenment and constitutes an attempt to rationalize phenomena long attributed to the supernatural.



I. A Man of the Enlightenment with Multiple Commitments

Baron d'Hénin de Cuvillers is described as an emblematic figure of the 18th century, who was at once a soldier, diplomat, man of letters, and researcher. A Napoleonic officer and diplomat in charge of affairs, he also pursued an intense intellectual activity. A Freemason and member of numerous learned societies, he actively participated in the scientific and philosophical life of his time.

His interest in psychological and physiological phenomena took root very early on in his personal journey. As a child, he witnessed the Convulsionaries of Saint-Médard, whose spectacular manifestations left a lasting impression on his mind. This early exposure to so-called extraordinary phenomena fueled his curiosity and prompted him to seek natural rather than supernatural explanations. Throughout his life, he read, observed, experimented, and compared, striving to distinguish authentic facts from exaggerated or fraudulent accounts.

II. A Radical Critique of Animal Magnetism

Cuvillers was at the heart of the debates sparked by animal magnetism, popularized by Franz Anton Mesmer. While he did not deny the existence of real phenomena observed during magnetism sessions, he categorically rejected the hypothesis of an invisible and universal magnetic fluid. In his view, this theory was based on unproven beliefs and

fueled a new form of superstition.

He severely criticized magnetizers who, out of ignorance or self-interest, perpetuated the illusion of a mysterious power. He denounced charlatans who exploited the credulity of the public and insisted on the need for a rational approach. For Cuvillers, the crises, convulsions, and healings observed are not the product of an external agent but result from natural mechanisms linked to the functioning of the nervous system and the human imagination.

This critical position led him to oppose not only Mesmer, but also his disciples, such as the Marquis de Puységur and Deleuze. He believed that blind adherence to an unproven system discredited research and prevented a true understanding of psychological phenomena.

III. Imagination as a Central Explanatory Principle

The main idea in Cuvillers' work is that imagination is the key to understanding hypnotic phenomena. He describes it as a force capable of amplifying perceptions, influencing the body, and producing real physiological effects. Far from being an illusion, imagination is, for him, a natural faculty, subject to deterministic laws.

In *Le magnétisme éclairé* (1820), he developed a theory that would later be described as "imaginationist." He asserted that ignorance of the laws of nature was the source of false miracles and that the mission of the scientist was to enlighten, not to mystify. His goal is not to create a new belief, but to deconstruct old superstitions, whether religious or magnetic, in order to make people freer and more responsible.

He also emphasizes the role of the relationship between the operator and the subject. What magnetizers call "connecting" is, according to him, nothing more than an interaction with the subject's imagination. The operator's words, gestures, and attitude act as psychological triggers, without the need to invoke a mysterious fluid.

IV. Dialogue and Surpassing Abbé de Faria

Cuvillers recognizes the importance of Abbé de Faria, whom he considers to be the founder of the imaginationist movement. Faria had already rejected the idea of magnetic fluid and emphasized the role of concentration and speech. However, Cuvillers believes that his predecessor did not provide a sufficiently explanatory theoretical framework.

Where Faria merely described processes and effects,

Cuvillers proposed a true conceptualization. He introduced new terminology to describe hypnotic states, preferring the concepts of hypnoscopy and understanding to those of somnambulism. He emphasizes that, in the hypnotic state, the subject is not actually asleep, but has access to a heightened form of concentration, understanding, and visualization.

This approach heralds a surprisingly modern conception of hypnosis, centered on the patient's subjective experience and their ability to express their perceptions and feelings.

V. The Invention of the Term "Hypnosis" and a New Nomenclature

History records that Braid invented the word hypnosis in 1843 from the Greek "Hypnos" meaning "sleep."

But the first real use of the term can be traced back to the Baron in 1820, with a much more relevant etymological meaning.

The term hypnosis derives its etymology from the ancient Greek "ὑπνος" (hýpnos) and "ἐνύπνιον" (ényption), meaning sleep accompanied by daydreaming, or daydreaming during drowsiness. Hénin points out that the term "ἐνύπνιον" (ényption) is sometimes used by Greek authors to express sleep accompanied by dreams. Hénin's neologisms are therefore created from this root word, from which he derives the term hypnosis. "I will first point out that the word sleep is expressed in Greek in several ways, by "hypnos" and "ényption." The words 'hypnos' and "ényption" commonly mean ordinary sleep. However, the term 'ényption' is sometimes used by Greek authors to express sleep accompanied by dreams, and the derived word 'hypnosis' truly has this meaning."

As we said in the preface to our book, during the day we are conscious and at night we sleep and dream. Hypnosis simply consists of creating a "brain switch" and making us dream during the day. As the brain functions differently, the physiological and psychological phenomena obtained are different. In this cerebral process of dream activation, suggestion can create a state of relaxation (medical or therapeutic hypnosis) or a state of activation (stage hypnosis, sports hypnosis).

Hénin de Cuvillers created a series of terms, around 670, with the same Greek roots "Hýpnos" and "Ényption," such as: hypnology, hypnocriticism, hypnopole, hypnocracy, hypnomancy, etc.

For Hénin de Cuvillers, imagination is at the heart of the hypnotic process and not a magnetic belief instilled in a believer manipulated with a placebo simulacrum. This is why we must consider Hénin de Cuvillers as the true creator of modern hypnosis.

Around this notion, Cuvillers forged a multitude of neologisms intended to describe the different aspects of the hypnotic phenomenon. This terminological approach reflects his desire to construct a coherent science, endowed with clear concepts, in order to break with the vagueness and esotericism of animal magnetism.

VI. Abéaston: a Universal Hypnotic Induction

In *Le magnétisme animal retrouvé dans l'antiquité* (Animal Magnetism Rediscovered in Antiquity, 1821), Cuvillers undertook a vast historical investigation. He

identified a technique of hypnotic induction based on immobility and the gesture of the open hand, which he called Abéaston. This gesture, a symbol of protection and absence of fear, is found in many cultures, according to him: ancient Egypt, Brahmanic India, and early Christianity.

Cuvillers interpreted this practice not as a magical ritual, but as a physiological and psychological process.

Immobility, fixation of attention, and body posture induce a state of hypovigilance conducive to trance. This analysis anticipates modern concepts such as catalepsy, relaxation, and self-hypnosis.

Conclusion

This article strongly defends the idea that Baron d'Hénin de Cuvillers is the true founder of modern hypnosis. Through his rejection of magnetic fluid, his emphasis on imagination, his conceptualization efforts, and his historical and comparative approach, he places hypnosis in a scientific and rationalist perspective. His work appears to be a pioneering attempt to understand psychological phenomena without succumbing to religious superstition or pseudo-scientific illusion. Long forgotten, Cuvillers deserves to be recognized as a major figure in the history of hypnosis and modern psychology.



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