Rupert Sheldrake

Rupert Sheldrake is a biologist and author of more than 80 scientific papers and 14 books (seven of them in collaboration with other authors). He was among the top 100 Global Thought Leaders for 2013, as ranked by the Duttweiler Institute, Zurich, Switzerland's leading think tank.[1] Sheldrake is known both for pioneering research in plant biology (on the plant hormone auxin and apoptosis), and for his unconventional scientific hypotheses. He is especially known for his theories and research on 'morphic resonance' and morphogenetic fields, unexplained abilities of animals and humans, and for discussions of science, philosophy, parapsychology, religion and spirituality. His work has focused on broadening the research agendas of today's natural sciences, and enabling constructive dialogues between these different fields.

Sheldrake's most recent books are *Science and Spiritual Practices: Transformative Experiences and their Effects on Our Bodies, Brains and Health* and *Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work*.

Career Summary

Rupert Sheldrake studied natural sciences at Cambridge University, where he was a Scholar of Clare College, and was awarded the University Botany Prize (1962) and a double first class honours degree (1963). He studied philosophy and history of science at Harvard University, where he was a Frank Knox Fellow (1963-64), before returning to Cambridge, where he gained a Ph.D. in biochemistry (1967). He was a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge (1967-73), where he was Director of Studies in biochemistry and cell biology. As the Rosenheim Research Fellow of the Royal Society (1970-73), he carried out research on the development of plants and the ageing of cells in the Department of Biochemistry at Cambridge University. While at Cambridge, together with Philip Rubery, he discovered the mechanism of polar auxin transport, the process by which the plant hormone auxin is carried from the shoots towards the roots, a discovery that has been described as 'astonishingly visionary' and was confirmed in the twenty-first century.[2]

From 1968 to 1969, as a Royal Society Leverhulme Scholar based in the Botany Department of the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Sheldrake studied rain forest plants. From 1974 to 1985 he was Principal Plant Physiologist and Consultant Physiologist at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Hyderabad, India, where he helped develop new cropping systems now widely used by farmers. While in India, he lived for a year and a half at

the ashram of Fr Bede Griffiths in Tamil Nadu, where he wrote his first book, *A New Science of Life*, published in 1981 (new edition 2009).

Since 1981, Sheldrake has continued research on developmental and cell biology. He has investigated unexplained aspects of animal behaviour, such as how pigeons find their way home, the telepathic abilities of dogs, cats and other animals, and the apparent abilities of animals to anticipate earthquakes and tsunamis. He subsequently studied similar phenomena in people, including the sense of being stared at, telepathy between mothers and babies, and telepathy in connection with telephone calls. Sheldrake bases his research on natural history and experiments under natural conditions, as opposed to laboratory studies.

In his most recent book (2012), called *The Science Delusion* in the UK and *Science Set Free* in the US, he examines the ten dogmas of modern science, and shows how they can be turned into questions.[3]

Early Life

Sheldrake was born on June 28, 1942, in Newark-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire, in the English Midlands, and was brought up there. His family were Methodists, and he went to a high church Anglican boarding school, Worksop College. From a very early age he was interested in plants and animals, and was encouraged in this interest by his father, an amateur naturalist, microscopist, and pharmacist.

After a gap year working as a technician in a pharmaceutical laboratory, he went to Cambridge where he studied biology and biochemistry. He is quoted as saying that during his time at Cambridge

> a great gulf opened between my original inspiration—namely an interest in actual living organisms—and the kind of biology I was taught: orthodox, mechanistic biology which essentially denies the life of organisms, but instead treats them as machines. There seemed to be very little connection between the direct experience of animals and plants and the way I was learning about them, manipulating them, dissecting them into smaller and smaller bits, getting down to the molecular level, and seeing them as evolving by blind chance and the blind forces of natural selection. I felt more and more that there was something wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it. No one else seemed to think there was anything wrong.[4]

As an undergraduate Sheldrake discovered the writings of Goethe, the poet and botanist, and was attracted to his vision of a different kind of science—a holistic science that integrated direct experience and understanding.

Early Career

While Sheldrake was a graduate student at Cambridge he joined a group called the Epiphany Philosophers, who were connected with an Anglican monastery called Community of the Epiphany. This group of philosophers, physicists, and mystics explored the connections among mystical experience, philosophy, and science.

In the early 1970s, while he was Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, Sheldrake began to formulate the idea of morphic resonance, the basis of memory in nature, which he has been working on ever since. He says the idea came to him 'in a moment of insight', but while some of his colleagues at Cambridge - philosophers, linguists, and classicists - were quite open-minded, the idea of 'mysterious telepathy-type interconnections between organisms and of collective memories within species' was not so popular with his scientific colleagues.[5]

He resigned his fellowship at Cambridge in 1974 and went to work in India as Principal Plant Physiologist at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Hyderabad. He was Principal Plant Physiologist until 1978, and was then Consultant Plant Physiologist until 1985, working on the physiology of tropical legume crops, improving crops for subsistence farmers in India and other parts of the semi-arid tropics.

After a period of spiritual seeking he was confirmed, at the age of 34, by an Indian bishop in the Church of South India (an ecumenical church formed by the coming together of Anglicans and Methodists). After this, he discovered a teacher, Father Bede Griffiths, who ran a Christian ashram in South India that combined aspects of Indian culture with Christian tradition, and wrote his first book there, *A New Science of Life*.

Research Themes

Morphic Resonance

In brief, morphic resonance is the hypothesis that there is a kind of inherent memory in nature. For example, within each species (or self-organising system), each individual draws upon a collective memory and in turn contributes to it. The hypothesis predicts that new chemicals should get easier to crystallize as time goes on because the crystal forms become increasingly habitual, sustained by morphic resonance from increasing numbers of previous crystals of that type. Likewise, if animals, such as rats, learn a new trick in one place, rats all over the world should be able to learn it quicker. There is already evidence that these effects occur.[6]

The word 'morphic' comes from the Greek word morphē, meaning 'form,' and expresses the idea that morphic attractors pull developing systems towards them, and that the form of the attractor depends on a kind of memory given by morphic resonance. Thus, for example, an oak seedling is attracted towards the mature form of an oak tree through the morphic attractor in its morphogenetic field.[7] A field is most generally defined as regions of influence that stretch out beyond the organism, like a magnetic or gravitational field.

Psi Research

In the past 20 years, Sheldrake has concentrated on common, everyday psi phenomena that most people have personally experienced, such as the sense of being stared at, pets knowing when their owners are coming home, homing behaviour in pigeons, telepathic bonds between mothers and children, and telephone telepathy (thinking of someone for no apparent reason who then calls).

Controversies

Sheldrake has been the subject of several public controversies, which are summarized in the Appendix to his book Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home.[8]

John Maddox

In 1981, John Maddox, then editor of the scientific journal *Nature,* declared *A New Science of Life* a 'book for burning'. In an interview for BBC TV in 1994, Maddox justified his attack on Sheldrake's book by saying that morphic resonance 'is not a scientific theory'. He added: 'Sheldrake is putting forward magic instead of science, and that can be condemned with exactly the language that the popes used to condemn Galileo, and for the same reasons: it is heresy.'[9]

Steven Rose

In 1988, Sheldrake wrote in The Guardian that the idea that 'memories were stored in our brains' was 'only a theory' and 'despite decades of research, the phenomenon of memory remains mysterious'.[10] Professor Steven Rose responded that neuroscientists had shown that memories are stored in specific changes in brain cells,[11] a claim that Sheldrake refuted.[12] Rose agreed to run an experiment with Sheldrake investigating whether one-day-old chicks were influenced by previous batches of one-day-old chicks.[13] Sheldrake and Rose disagreed over the interpretation of the results, with Rose stating that the morphic resonance hypothesis had been disconfirmed,[14] and Sheldrake saying that the results were consistent with the hypotheses.[15]

Richard Wiseman

In 1996, Richard Wiseman, a psychologist at the University of Hertford, criticized Sheldrake's experiments with the return-anticipating dog Jaytee, and agreed to perform a replication study using the same experimental design as Sheldrake.[16] While Wiseman's data agreed with Sheldrake's, he concluded that his data proved that Jaytee was not psychic, using a criterion for data interpretation that he had not discussed with Sheldrake, and which arguably did not make sense within the logic of the experiment.[17] [18] [19] [20]. He published this conclusion before Sheldrake had had the chance to publish his own primary research.[21] In 2000, James Randi, the prominent magician, claimed also to have run independent replication studies on the dog telepathy phenomenon and found it to be false, stating that the video data did not count as evidence; but when pressed for experimental records, Randi said he did not have any, and that he had also never seen the video.[22]

Michael Shermer

Skeptic Michael Shermer denounced Sheldrake's book *The Sense of Being Stared At* as merely demonstrating phenomena that could be explained by normal means; he later admitted to Sheldrake that he had not read the book.[23] Similar evidence-free attacks have come from Lewis Wolpert[24] and Richard Dawkins[25].

TEDx and Wikipedia

More recently, Sheldrake has been involved in a controversy over his TEDx talk 'The Science Delusion', which was taken down from the main TED website after being dismissed as 'pseudoscience' by the atheist blogger Jerry Coyne.[26] The ensuing online controversy attracted more comments than any other TED discussion thread.[27]

Sheldrake's Wikipedia page has been the subject of an ongoing editing disputes as a result of a group of skeptical activists making the claim that Sheldrake is a 'pseudoscientist' and attempting to portray his work as negatively as possible. Other editors have attempted to restore a more balanced view.[28]

Others

Other controversies have involved the National Geographic[29], Dr. Susan Blackmore, [30] [31] PZ Myers,[32] Robert Todd Carroll,[33] Dr Robert Baker,[34] Dr David Marks,[35] and Frank Visser.[36]

Personal Life

Sheldrake lives in London with his wife Jill Purce. They have two sons, Dr Merlin Sheldrake, who was research fellow at The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama, and Cosmo Sheldrake, a musician.

Books

A New Science of Life: The Hypothesis of Formative Causation (1981). New edition 2009 (in the US published as *Morphic Resonance*)

The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature (1988; new edition 2011)

The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God (1992)

Seven Experiments that Could Change the World: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Revolutionary Science (1994; new edition 2002) Winner of the Book of the Year Award from the British Institute for Social Inventions

Dogs That Know When Their Owners are Coming Home, and Other Unexplained Powers of Animals (1999; new edition 2011) Winner of the Book of the Year Award from the British Scientific and Medical Network

The Sense of Being Stared At, And Other Aspects of the Extended Mind (2003; new edition 2013)

The Science Delusion: Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry (2012) published in the US as *Science Set Free* (2012) Winner of the Book of the Year Award from the British Scientific and Medical Network

Science and Spiritual Practices: Transformative Experiences and their Effects on Our Bodies, Brains and Health (2018)

Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work (2019)

With Ralph Abraham and Terence McKenna

Chaos, Creativity and Cosmic Consciousness (2001), Inner Traditions International. ISBN 0-939680-97-1.

The Evolutionary Mind (2005), Monkfish Publishing. ISBN 0-9632861-1-0.

With Matthew Fox

Natural Grace: Dialogues on Science and Spirituality (1996), Bloomsbury, London; Doubleday, New York, USA. ISBN 0-385-48356-2.

The Physics of Angels (1996), Harper San Francisco, USA. ISBN 0-06-062864-2.

With Kate Banks

Boy's Best Friend (2015), Farrar, Strauss, Giroud, New York, USA. ISBN 978-0374380083.

Awards

1963: Cambridge University Botany Award

1963-1964: Frank Knox Fellowhip at Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA.

1968-1969: Royal Society Leverhulme Scholar, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1967-1973: Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, England.

1970-1973: Rosenheim Research Fellow of the Royal Society, England.

1994: The book ''Seven Experiments that Could Change the World: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Revolutionary Science', received the Book of the Year award from the British Institute for Social Inventions; Medal of Honour, at the annual festival of 'Science-Frontières' i Cavaillon, France.

1999: The book 'Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home, And Other Unexplained Powers of Animals. (Hutchinson, London; Crown, New York) received the Book of the Year award from the British Scientific and Medical Network, England, and was a bestseller in England, Austria, Germany and USA.

2000: Steinbach Scholar in Residence at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Cape Cod, Massachusetts

2005-10: Director of the Perrott-Warrick Project, funded from Trinity College, Cambridge University

2012: ‘The Science Delusion’ (UK), ‘Science Set Free’ (USA) received the ‘Book of the Year’ award from the British Scientific and Medical Network.

2013: Nominated as one of the 100 most influential global thinkers by the Duttweiler institute in Zürich, the leading thought-institute in Switzerland.[37]

2014: Doshi Bridgebuilder Award at the Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, USA, for fostering understanding between cultures, peoples and disciplines.

2015: Lucia Torri Cianci Award in Venice, Italy, for innovative thinking.

Institutional Associations

Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts

Fellow of the Zoological Society

Fellow of the Cambridge Philosophical Society

Member of the Society for Experimental Biology

Member of the Society for Scientific Exploration

Member of the Scientific and Medical Network

Member of the Society for Psychical Research

Member of the Parapsychological Association

Fellow of the Institute of Noetic Sciences in California

Visiting Professor at the Graduate Institute in Connecticut

Fellow of Schumacher College in Devon, England.

Fellow of the Temenos Acdemy, England.

Endnotes

Footnotes

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6.^ Sheldrake, R. (2011, 2nd edn.). *The Presence of the Past*. Icon Books.
7.^ http://www.thebestschools.org/features/rupert-sheldrake-interview/?utm_r...

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15.^ Sheldrake, R. (1992). 'Rose Refuted'. *Rivista di Biologia - Biology Forum* 85 (3/4), 455-460.
16.^ Sheldrake, R. and Smart, P. (2000). A Dog That Seems To Know When His Owner is Coming Home Videotaped Experiments and Observations. Journal of Scientific Exploration 14, 233-255.
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19.^ http://sheldrake.org/research/animal-powers/the-psychic-pet-phenomenon
20.^ http://sheldrake.org/videos/richard-wiseman-s-failed-attempt-to-debunk-t...
21.^ Wiseman. R, Smith, M. & Milton, J. Can animals detect when their owners are returning home? An experimental test of the 'psychic pet' phenomenon.
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27.^ http://sebastian.penraeth.com/post/46115422948/teds-spectacular-fail-ide...
28.^ http://sheldrake.org/reactions/wikipedia
29.^ http://sheldrake.org/reactions/ofcom-adjudication-in-rupert-s-favour
30.^ Blackmore, S. (2009). 'An idea with resonance: More than anything, Sheldrake's continuing popularity is rooted in our need to believe'. *The Guardian*.
31.^ Blackmore, S. (1999). 'If the truth is out there, we've not found it yet'. *The Times Higher Education Supplement* 18.
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