

PRESENCE OF THE PAST: Rupert Sheldrake's Renegade View of History

Unless you grew up on some other planet, you probably learned in school that the universe started with the Big Bang, and since then, things have been ticking along according to plan, evolving relentlessly toward perfect order (regardless of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, or Wolfgang Pauli's work.) Kids today are still 'learning' that the universe is made up of protons and electrons and DNA and that there is nothing to life except what you can dissect out of cell samples after you grind up a living thing in the lab.

Rupert Sheldrake, renegade scientist, in *The Presence of the Past* expands on the idea of memory in nature. Oak trees grow out of acorns because of the principle of "causative formation", the cumulative experience of all previous acorns and oak trees. In *The Rebirth of Nature*, Sheldrake hopes the reader can once again think of nature as alive instead of inanimate and mechanical, echoing Morris Berman's *The ReEnchantment of the World*. "What makes a rabbit rabbit-shaped? How do newts regenerate limbs? Why are molecules shaped the way they are? Why do societies arrange themselves in certain predictable patterns?" Sheldrake asks. The answer: morphic resonance. A new concept to add to the science books.

In *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Revolutionary Science* Sheldrake shares some of his own learning experiences.

"When I was about fourteen, my biology master at school had convinced me that

religion was a thing of the past, and science was the thing of the future. Religion shackled humans to superstition, priests, and dogma; but science liberated humans and enabled them to march forward to a new era of prosperity and brotherhood. Technological progress would bring about this kind of heaven on earth, through human reason, not through blind faith and mumbo jumbo.”

“I was taught orthodox, mechanistic biology which essentially denies the life of organisms but instead treats them as machines. I had to learn that you can’t respond emotionally to animals and plants. You can’t connect with them in any way except by detached objective reason. 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 blind forces of natural selection.”

Kids in middle school and high school who have endured owl-pellet units, survived the last minute frenzy of having to produce a science fair project, or opted out of science altogether will be energized by Sheldrake’s challenge to build and perform experiments to test his theory of morphic resonance as an enduring principle of science. He even invites visitors to his website <www.sheldrake.org> to participate in an online research project to find out if you really can tell if someone is going to e-mail you!

Sheldrake's work is mightily unsettling to our 'scientific' concept of a world where order reigns, where organisms are just machines. In answer to the four-hundred years of traditional scientific exploration begun with Descartes (whose insight into the true nature of things was given to him by an angel), Sheldrake proposes that nature is definitely not a machine.

He trots out evidence and experiments that strongly convince the reader that we do not live in the "clockmaker" world, but that everything from atoms to galaxies creates a unique "morphic field", a collective or pooled memory. Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called it "inscape", physicist David Bohm called it "implicate order" and linguist Noam Chomsky called it "deep structure". It is what tells the kernel of corn to become a stalk of corn, enables each new generation of mice born knowing how to run a maze faster than their parents.

A New Science of Life: The Hypothesis of Morphic Resonance introduces readers to the concept of morphic resonance and the notion that once an event or idea has come into being, its replication is made easier through the repeated "habit" of its use. This opens up the unsettling question of whether our increasingly unstable society will shake itself apart with continued increases in "novelty" as the unimaginable (Columbine, suicide bombings, and blackouts) becomes "habit."

Throughout his books and workshops (see a list of events on his website), Sheldrake patiently explains his idea that as with magnetism, or gravity, or love,

we can't prove that morphic resonance is there except by its effects. He explores the question of where does memory reside? Is it in the brain? Or is it "out there", like your address book on Yahoo? This raises the disturbing possibility that there really IS some force (as Han Solo says) that "binds the universe together."

Sheldrake's research indicates that it is all connected somehow. He persistently focuses on finding the evidence of those connections and exploring how they are formed and how they are broken. Rupert Sheldrake's basic hypothesis of simple: A carrot seed grows into the shape of a carrot because it "inherits" the memory of how to become a carrot from all previously existing carrots. Blind hordes of African termites build identical 10-foot-tall mirror-images of each other's nests even when a metal sheet divides their work down the middle. The newspaper crossword puzzle proves easier to solve late in the day, because the morphic field for the solution has already been built.

Once something has been brought into being, it is far easier for it to become habit by repeated re-invention, forming a morphic resonance field, according to his twenty-plus years of research. This can be good or bad, depending on whether you're looking at sheep being cloned or kids shooting each other in the cafeteria.

Perhaps it is Sheldrake's research as a biologist that is most persuasive of the interconnectedness of all living things. He points out in every one of his books the persistence of memory, myth, ritual, and form not just in human terms, but in

examples from the world of plants, slugs and birds as well as humans. Sheldrake explores quandaries such as the homing instincts of pigeons, the remarkable ability of starfish to regenerate lost limbs, and how is it that embryos develop in ways that repeat the development of their ancestors. They seem to have within themselves a kind of memory, he says; he builds the case for belief in morphic fields that are self organizing, have purpose. are fractal, and cumulative.

But the most endearing of his books is *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home and Other Unexplained Powers of Animals*. His research with dogs, cats, birds looks at their abilities to find owners at great distances, their ability to find their way home from faraway, and studies the strong connections many people feel with pets.

"The thing about dogs," Sheldrake says, "although some people might think this is trivial from a scientific point of view, it's actually exactly the opposite. Science believes animals and plants are all just unconscious automatons. The whole of nature is unconscious except for human beings. We're the only smart guys in the whole universe and somehow figured out how everything works. And that means through science we can manipulate nature and improve products for corporations. Descartes believed the only kind of mind was the conscious mind. Then Freud reinvented the unconscious. Then Jung said it's not just a personal unconscious but a collective unconscious. Morphic resonance shows us that our very souls are

connected with the world around us."

His database of instances of animal-knowing includes details of a Chinese earthquake detection program using dogs which Sheldrake is replicating in California, early storm-warning capabilities of other animals, and increasing the scope of "service" dogs to improve the quality of life of the blind, the deaf, epileptic, diabetic and others. It's a remarkable body of research

In addition to meticulously documented instances of animals knowing when their people decide to leave work, he shares stories of all sorts of creatures knowing their "way back home", taking readers, skeptical or not, to asking: are we all just trying to find our way back home? For more information, go to www.sheldrake.org

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