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RUPERT SHELDRAKE AND THE SEARCH FOR MORPHIC RESONANCES

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Groups have habits, too, patterns of behaving and believing that are reiterated from individual to individual. The folk ways and mores of a community, its customs and law, its traditions and social roles, its expectations of the future, its institutional structures, are all iterated features that characterize that community.

- George Allan, *Contemporary Philosophy*, 1989

The controversial theories put forward over the years by the British scientist Rupert Sheldrake have interesting but so far neglected relationships to the discussion of culture, history and ritual. All of Sheldrake's work makes use of metaphor and it has gained considerable currency in a climate where, for some years, grand theory has been poorly received.

But Sheldrake is persistent. To his list of books, including *A New Science of Life*, *The Presence of the Past*, *The Rebirth of Nature*, and *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World*, he has now added *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home* (Crown Publishers, New York, 1999). Undoubtedly this volume will provoke as much controversy as the others, even though the animal behavior which is the launching pad for his considerable speculations is well known. Known it is, but explained it is not.

Much of Sheldrake's work rests on the proposition that there are social, or morphic fields, which when fully understood will throw light on a great deal of plant and animal behavior which has so far defied explanation. If he had confined himself to examining the mores of migrating butterflies or of homing pigeons, he might have encountered less criticism. But he includes human behavior in his studies. So one must ask just how commonsensical is it to believe, for example, that rituals have an existence in some sort of physical sense - a field that is built up by continued activity. Is there, somewhere, a morphic field of Masonic rites?

The extraordinarily creative patterns by which much of human life is organized the *schemata* that our educational system demands of us, the metaphors which even the most common folk apply to life, the symbols, ranging from the Rotarian's wheel to the priest's wafer - do they endure as Sheldrake suggests somewhere outside of our brief consciousness and influence the present? Is there a quasi physical basis quite outside of the human mind for the abstract understanding that humankind persistently seeks to apply to life?

Perhaps our understanding of this, and of Sheldrake, can be enhanced by asking if ritual objects have an anthropological or historical existence without being considered as part of a whole. Most of us would be uncomfortable about objects without history. There must be explanations. "The often fragmentary, incoherent, non-organic nature of much of the present ethnological material," wrote Bronislaw Malinowski in *Magic, Science and Religion*, "is due to the cult of 'pure fact.'"

The dilemma is that patterns, rituals, trends, or whatever one wishes to term such phenomena, seem too mutable to sustain history, and objects (pace the anthropologist's pots herds) often seem mute to its banishments. The former is fleeting and the latter is too concrete. Surely this situation deserves careful study.

Ultimately, we are much more dependent on central organizing metaphors than we would like to admit. In order to understand what these images are doing to daily life we have to investigate the organization of ideas at a deeper level. This turns out to be surprisingly difficult. Needless to say, even if one does not accept the proposition of Sheldrake that there are morphic fields and morphic resonances, important images do not come from nowhere. The present situation is that we shamelessly use organizing metaphors without being willing to discuss the proposition of a thinker like Sheldrake that their origins are enigmatic and worthy of a hypothesis.

Unless the claim is made that philosophy does not have to deal with physical events, which would be outrageous, theories like Sheldrake's which do deal with the physical world should have a hearing. After all, when we come to examine the current discussions in science, we are embarrassed to find as much confusion and contention as exists in history, and we handle the contradictions by ignoring them. Of course, Richard Dawkins, whose genetic theories have been so popular as to have almost given him a claim to having inherited Darwin's mantle, has provided a popular explanation with his manipulative genes, and John Maynard Smith has reassuringly suggested that game-theory is relevant to evolutionary biology.¹ We evidentially are ghosts in selfish machines.

This is partly the result of a situation where for many contemporary scholars, the *quality* of facts may create problems, but not the *nature* of them. When patterns change, the facts supposedly remain; the facts themselves are not regarded as changeable.² Yet we are on notice that this is possibly not the case. Malinowski complained on more than one occasion about the chaos of facts, that they became evidence only when seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. Fieldwork for him was an effort to impose order on chaos, to take general laws and apply them. Sheldrake, on the other hand, has taken chaos and tried to find a general law that they might suggest. Now, by appealing over the heads of his scientific contemporaries to a vast audience that has not known about attacks on mechanistic science but which knows that animals find their homes from long distances away, that they have forebodings of earthquakes and other disasters, and that they know when their owners are coming home, he has taken the battle into the trenches. "Vitalism," he writes "asserts that the phenomena of life cannot be fully understood in terms of physical laws derived only from the study of inanimate systems, but that an additional causal factor is at work in living organisms."³ Mechanistic explanation has not yet carried the day, and holism has not yet been vanquished. The great questions remain. Philosophy has work to do.

ENDNOTES

1. See "Interview with John Maynard Smith", <http://cpnss.lse.ac.uk/darwin/evo/jms.htm>, 2 February 1999.
2. "First a pattern comes into being insofar as mere flux takes on a determinate coordination, movements becoming no longer random, idiosyncratic, but lining up in replicating ways, lured or compelled by their environment to mimic predecessors and neighbors. Second, this coordinate accomplishment is a pattern that can be expressed without reference to the actualities upon which it rests ... it serves to explain them, perhaps to predict them, to make sense of them. Hence patterns are the meanings of things, the sources of their importance, of their place and role and destiny within the ongoing course of time. And third, patterns perish when the habitual behaviors of the actualities manifesting them change: modulate, become variable, break down." George Allan, "The Process and Reality of an Educational Canon", *Contemporary Philosophy*, Vol. XII, No.9, May 1999, 6.
- 3 Rupert Sheldrake, *A New Science of Life; The Hypothesis of Morphic Resonance*, Park Street Press, Rochester (Vermont), 1995 (1981), 43.

