

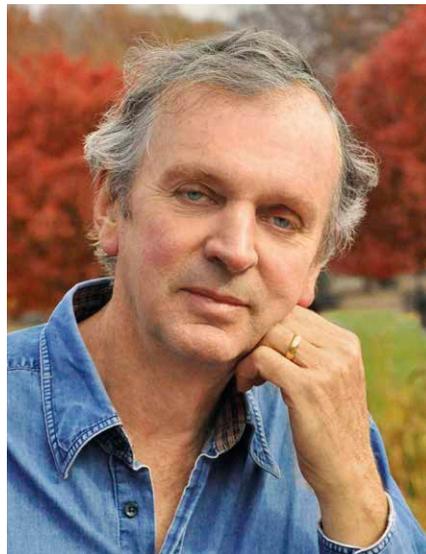
LIVING WELL IN THE NON-MATERIALIST WORLD

Oliver Tickell meets Rupert Sheldrake, scientific ‘heretic’ and spiritual advocate

Rupert Sheldrake is a man who arouses fierce anger among his critics, and equal if not more powerful admiration and loyalty among his followers. He is, after all, perhaps the single individual who has fought back most effectively against the tide of materialist philosophy that has become the official creed of the modern age.

Yet he is not an obvious pugilist. Tall, lightly built, carefully spoken and mildly mannered, he measures his words with the air of a learned Anglican vicar. It’s hard to imagine him picking a fight with anyone. Yet he has devoted most of his life to promulgating the idea that Nature, the world, the universe are infused and enthused by subtle powers and forces that need to be recognised and understood: there are more things in heaven and Earth than most of us could dream of. And that mission has involved more than a few high-profile clashes along the way.

“Science has been taken over by the philosophy of materialism – the idea that we live in a purely mechanistic universe where the only things that matter are physical and everything else is delusional,” says Sheldrake. “Its adherents believe that mind and consciousness are contained purely within the brains of people and possibly some animals, and can have no existence anywhere else. But these ideas are not scientific! They are just opinions, or rather dogmas. There is no evidence to support them – indeed, scientific findings are continually undermining them. For example, many people have had vivid near-death experiences under surgery while their brains have



Rupert Sheldrake Photo © Mia Hanson

been completely inactive. So where was their consciousness then?”

This question of consciousness is, he says, the “hard problem” – one that he and many other scientists and philosophers have long struggled with. “If you believe that the entire universe is unconscious, then how does consciousness arise? Some people claim that it is an illusion, something unreal and of little importance. Another view is that there is a life or soul throughout Nature, so even subatomic particles are endowed with some minute quantum of consciousness that can be amplified and refined in a crystal, a tree or a human.”

What rankles deeply among Sheldrake’s opponents, who believe that such ideas constitute a heresy, is that he is himself a distinguished scientist. A Scholar of Clare College, Cambridge in the 1960s, he read Natural Sciences and was awarded a double first-class

honours degree. Subsequently he studied the philosophy and history of science at Harvard, returning to Cambridge for his doctorate in biochemistry. As a Fellow of Clare College and a Royal Society Research Fellow in Cambridge’s biochemistry department, he studied plant development and cell ageing, unravelling the secrets of the plant hormone auxin. Next he studied rainforest plants at the University of Malaya as a Royal Society Leverhulme Scholar, moving in 1974 to the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics in Hyderabad, India as Principal Plant Physiologist, remaining there until 1985.

He used part of his time in India to explore religious beliefs and practices, and to write his first book, *A New Science of Life*, which in 1981 unleashed the idea of ‘morphic resonance’ on an unsuspecting world: a explanation of why, for example, when a novel protein has crystallised for the first time, it will subsequently crystallise much more quickly. This led him to propose the existence of a ‘morphogenetic’ field able to contain and transmit such information; and to deduce that memory is inherent in the totality of Nature, not just in the brains of individuals.

These revolutionary thoughts were attacked by John Maddox, editor of the scientific journal *Nature*, first in an editorial, “A book for burning?” and later in a 1994 BBC documentary in which Maddox argued: “It’s unnecessary to introduce magic into the explanation of physical and biological phenomena when in fact there is every likelihood that the continuation of research as it’s now practised will indeed fill all the gaps



Illustration by Aitch www.aitch.ro

that Sheldrake draws attention to. You see, Sheldrake's is not a scientific theory. 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."

Sheldrake recalls: "The principal charge was that I was trying to introduce magic into science. What Maddox meant by 'magic' was everything from telepathy to the collective unconscious and other so-called paranormal phenomena. But these things aren't magic:

they're just part of Nature. Even the world 'paranormal' is wrong, because it means 'beyond normal', but actually things like telephone telepathy happen to 80% of people on a regular basis. They are normal. They are only 'para' if you begin from a rigid theoretical belief

that these things can't happen and selectively ignore all the evidence that they do." Hence the need for a 'new science of life' to systematise observations of such phenomena and elaborate explanations.

Sheldrake describes the approaches of Maddox and another leading critic, Oxford University's Richard Dawkins, as 'scientism' to distinguish them from science itself. "Real science has to be grounded in empirical phenomena, however mysterious those phenomena might appear," he insists. "You can't just go rejecting great swathes of evidence while claiming to speak in the name of science. Dawkins' title at Oxford was Professor for the Public Understanding of Science, but his position is scientismic – not scientific. I have invited him to examine the evidence that supports my conclusions, but he has refused."

But now, over 35 years after his very public spat with Maddox, Sheldrake is certain that his side is winning the public battle for hearts and minds – just as Galileo's astronomical heresy ultimately overcame the condemnations of popes. "We are on the brink of a spiritual revival," he asserts. "Materialism and scientism have run their course. The doctrine is still dominant, but its power is ebbing away. It is no longer attractive to young people, and it is coming badly unravelled in purely scientific terms. The new direction is now clear as even committed materialists take up meditation and other forms of spiritual practice. Spirituality is the new frontier!"

It is a theme that he expands upon in his new book *Science and Spiritual Practices*, which sets aside time-worn arguments over the existence of God or the literal truth of religious doctrines, to assert a very clear fact supported by 96% of 2,800 scientific studies on the effects of religious belief and practices: they enhance health and happiness. "Until recently psychology has focused on the things that make us miserable, and ignored what makes us happy: things like good family relationships, stimulating conversations with friends, being part of something much greater than yourself, joining in communal singing and dancing, developing a sense of gratitude for life..."

"And it so happens that many of these things come with religious

practice. Conversely, if you reject religion, then you are cutting yourself off from many of the activities that would make your life happier and more satisfying, and the decline of religion in the West is one reason why there is so much depression. But now meditation is being recommended for depression by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, because it produces better outcomes than drugs. People

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who are grateful for what they have are happier and better-liked – and not just because people who are happy and well-liked are more grateful. Research studies have shown that the simple act of expressing gratitude makes people happier, and the effect can last for weeks or months."

In his new book, Sheldrake organises his findings into seven chapters on meditation, gratitude, reconnecting with the 'more-than-human' world, relating to plants, rituals and the presence of the past, singing, chanting and the power of music, and pilgrimages and holy places – each chapter concluding with suggestions for simple practices we can build into our lives so that we can enjoy the benefits for our own health and wellbeing.

Of these, pilgrimage has an especially deep resonance for Sheldrake, who is a patron of the British Pilgrimage Trust, founded in 2014 to revive one of Britain's most ancient spiritual practices, which was banned in the reign of Henry VIII. Even as Thomas Cromwell was organising the dissolution of Britain's monasteries (which of course provided food and shelter for countless pilgrims), he and his agents were also burning and desecrating shrines and statues, smashing medieval stained glass in churches, and destroying the physical infrastructure of pilgrimage.

Centuries later, a deep change is under way. As well as promoting the idea of pilgrimage, the Trust is publishing routes along public footpaths, green lanes and ridgelines that connect churches and other holy places in the landscape, organising pilgrimages that connect with the old calendar of saints' days, setting up pilgrims' accommodation in churches and 'pop-up' tents, and welcoming all to join in. Thousands have responded to the call, and pilgrim numbers are increasing every year. The Trust's website explains: "British pilgrimage is open to all, with or without religion. Bring your own beliefs."

"When you join with others on a pilgrimage," says Sheldrake, "you often join in communal singing in the open air, you have the connection with Nature as you walk through woods and meadows, the walking itself is a form of meditation, you are reconnecting with an ancient past going back to Chaucer and beyond, and you can use the experience to develop gratitude – many people go on a pilgrimage to give thanks. It's also a wonderful way to introduce immigrants of other faiths to the sacred landscapes of the country they have chosen to make their home."

True to his own principles, Sheldrake's personal spirituality is deeply rooted in his own native land, England, its history, traditions and religious heritage. "I am an Anglican and I recite the creed when I go to church. Maybe I reinterpret it to fit with my own beliefs. You do not have to believe that Mary was an intact virgin – the word in the Bible simply means 'young woman'. Nor do you have to believe in the resurrection of Jesus in a regular physical body. If he appeared to his followers, who were very attached to him, that does not seem very surprising. Similar things happen to a lot of people after the death of a loved one. The important thing is that Jesus is still a powerful, living presence long after his death. There is a survival of his being, and his potential influence in people's lives has become universal – a living spirit that can care for people on their onward journey, and lead them on the path after death into the direct experience of ultimate reality." R

Science and Spiritual Practices is published by Coronet.