Human Systems Management 31 (2012) 145–146
DOI 10.3233/HSM-2012-0761
IOS Press

Book Review

R. Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion*: *Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, Coronet, 2012 and published as *Science Set Free*, New York, NY: Random House, 2012, Hardback, 392 pp.

Rupert Sheldrake's new book, *The Science Delusion*, will no doubt be of great interest to readers of this journal, studying as it does human systems management, since it offers an entirely fresh if controversial perspective on the pursuit of knowledge, perhaps somewhat more in tune with this journal's emphasis on 'self-organizing' and 'self-managing' systems than found in conventional works. It might even present a 'world-view' from which a new school of management could potentially be developed in future years. If you are looking for new 'metaphors' which might help you expand your view of the study of organizations, you could possibly learn something from this author's insights.

This long, extended essay, running into twelve chapters and into around 400 pages, builds on the author's earlier books, now almost a dozen, presenting an unorthodox view of scientific development, that underlines the *holistic*, rather than the mechanistic dimensions of creation. Sheldrake, for instance, rejects theories that seek to explain how the universe and indeed individuals work by invoking mere materialistic explanations. He sees these as essentially reductionist, sterile and leading nowhere. He is, it must be mentioned, a practising Anglican albeit a liberal-minded 'Guardian' reading one, who weaves in more philosophy than theology into the discussion. Sheldrake also often favourably cites Alfred North Whitehead, (1861–1947), the mathematician who became a philosopher, who thought 'mind and matter' were linked in *time* rather than in space (see pp. 120–122) and who co-authored the epochal work, *Principia Mathematica*, with Bertrand Russell. He also quite likes the chaos theorist, Rene Thom (see pp. 146–147). On the other hand, he often crosses swords with materialists such as Richard Dawkins (pp. 255–257) and Lewis Wolpert (pp. 172–173), not that there is any material here for the religious zealots and he has no time for 'creationism'. This book is not in fact 'anti-science' at all; on the contrary, Sheldrake calls for a more open kind of empiricism.

As to the author's background, Dr Sheldrake was born in the UK in 1942, worked for several years in developmental biology at *Cambridge University* as a 'conventional' *scientist* where he originally took his doctorate in biochemistry and was soon a Fellow of *Clare College*, *Cambridge*. He also immersed himself the history and philosophy of science as a Knox Scholar at *Harvard University*. He was later Principal Plant Physiologist at the *International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics* (ICRISAT), in Hyderabad, India. From 2005 to 2010, he was Director of the 'Perrott-Warrick Project', set up as a memorial to F.W.H. Myers, who had been a Fellow of *Trinity College, Cambridge* and a founder of the Society for Psychical Research, a project funded from *Trinity* on the study of 'unexplained' human and animal abilities. Sheldrake has since gone on to become an independent science writer, based in London. He now lectures extensively in North America and indeed, across the continents. He is currently a Fellow of the *Institute of Noetic Sciences* in Petaluma, California, and a Visiting Professor at the *Graduate Institute* in Bethany, Connecticut, both institutions set up to be open doors to new, unconventional ways of thinking, in the US.

Sheldrake's own particular intellectual insight and own original contribution to knowledge is an explanation based on what he calls '*morphic resonance*' (see pp. 99–101) when similar kinds of activity in nature

resonate across time and space with subsequent ones. This notion, he argues, leads to a vision of a living, developing universe with its own inherent memory, somewhat like a 'mind' [although he mostly seeks to avoid this term] but decidedly *not* based on genetics. His hypothesis starts from the idea that developmental biology depends on organizing spaces he calls *morphic fields*. He believes what is organic, as well as non-organic, retains such memory. This is a kind of *cumulative* memory, a kind of *habit* memory, essentially built up through a run of species experience, hinging on the above-mentioned *resonance*, a concept he first extrapolated from his laboratory-work. All self-organizing systems in nature draw on collective memory. In the social domain, too, memory may also be seen in our archetypes, rituals, and traditions, which may well be expressions of the deep-rooted *collective memory of mankind.*

Such a stance, this reviewer would argue could well be expanded further to cover human systems management, organizational behaviour and the like. We already have a number of useful books at hand, with titles like Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organizations* (New York: Sage, 1997, updated 2007) amongst others, using metaphors in this area of study. Scholars in these fields have for example already talked about 'organizational memory', lodged in institutions and corporate bodies, in recent times. Others have linked this discussion to 'organizational knowledge and learning'. Sometimes this phenomenon is referred to as 'undocumented experiences' in organizations accumulated over the years and for example, in part subsumed under the 'standardization' measure in the Aston studies.

Google Scholar will give you a long list of published papers in this domain. It has been extended to the sub-fields of accounting, innovation, marketing and OB, to mention but a few. A recent (2011) paper, by Andrea J. Casey and Fernando Olivera, 'Reflections on Organizational Memory and Forgetting', in the *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *September, 2011, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 305–310,* fruitfully sums the state of play in the field. This area is but one spring-board for potential constructive theory-generating speculation using the resonance concept, indeed for 'thinking outside the box'. We clearly do need a *new paradigm* in the field of human systems management. Perhaps this might be one intellectual route to finding it.

Sheldrake presents his view of the philosophy and history of science in an entirely sober manner, setting out his case in bold propositions, albeit tempered by innumerable caveats and underpinned by strict referencing to academic books and papers across the wide range of fields he covers. Sheldrake asks us to be aware of the many dogmas which science has set up and to indulge our skepticism as far as we can do so. This injunction is no doubt a challenge to the numerous orthodoxies that have become features of the contemporary scientific world. To a degree, however, Sheldrake sometimes over-eggs the cake and there are repetitious moments from time to time, it must be said.

The first edition of this book remarkably enough sold out in four days in the UK but the work has since been reprinted in the UK and a US edition is at hand. It is mainly written for a non-specialist audience, is well-edited and is highly readable. The volume is well-produced by the publishers in hardback, with a full section of reference-notes near the end, followed by a substantial bibliography and a competent index. There are also many useful tables and figures, especially diagrams relating to biological examples. But a paperback edition is surely needed to give wider access to a student-audience.

To sum up, then, this book can be tentatively recommended to this journal's readers in terms of the clearly *revisionist* view it presents of both hard and soft sciences. It is certainly most thought-provoking, to say the least. Perhaps Sheldrake's observations on *morphic resonance* in the text, however, do *not* as yet extend to the world of management and organization as such - but he does touch on'systems-', 'complexity-' and related theories (see pp. 147–148). Readers will no doubt be able to take up many of his suggestive prompts on these and may readily be able to project them onto their own topics of interest.

Malcolm Warner
Judge Business School
University of Cambridge
Cambridge, CB2 1AG, UK

E-mail: m.warner@jbs.cam.ac.uk