

# Searching for truths

Jason Goodwin applauds a book that avoids the usual dogma and reminds us of the excitement of scientific inquiry

**Science**

**The Science Delusion**

Rupert Sheldrake (Coronet, £19.99, \*£16.99)

SCIENTISTS are taught—we are taught—that science has been a triumphant march into the light, straining first against religious dogma, then abandoning it altogether as an empty husk on the roadside. We live in a material world, which has been successively likened to a clock, a telephone exchange and a computer programme. Science can pull the machinery apart and find out how it works, like an exploded diagram. Duly labelled, the parts are inert and unchanging, for matter has no consciousness. Evolution has no purpose. As life churns on, the proper scientific view is that everything that is can be ultimately explained, and all that is left for scientists is to fill in some of the details.

**‘This book brings energy back to science’**

Rupert Sheldrake is himself a brilliant and respected scientist, who thinks that this attitude is wrong—for science and humanity. He has spent 30 years demonstrating, time and again, that scientists are in the grip of dogma: his own first book on the question, *The New Science of Life*, was long ago reviewed in *Nature* in just those terms: as a book ‘fit for burning... heresy’.

In *The Science Delusion*, he has written a fascinating, humane and refreshing book that any layman can enjoy, in which he takes 10 supposed scientific ‘laws’ and turns them, instead, into questions. He shows how scientific orthodoxy stifles the kind



Experiments, with homing pigeons or not, are the key to science

of radical enquiry that produced scientific breakthroughs in the first place, and suggests new ways of looking at the world around us. He shows how narrow science has become, when results are massaged and averaged to fit current theories, or even the demands of big business, and scientific ‘explanations’ are given as Holy Writ—when such explanations turn out, on investigation, to be inadequate metaphors for processes science itself cannot understand.

The book’s title is, of course, a swipe at Richard Dawkins, one of the high priests of materialism in science, which claims that everything in nature and the mind has a material basis—genes, memes, particles, chemical reactions. Man, says Prof Dawkins, is simply a Golem cooked up by his genes, insensibly drawn to do their bidding. It’s a point of view, but not certified scientifically or otherwise; genes, Dr Sheldrake observes, ‘are not really programs; they are not selfish, they do not mould matter, or shape form, or aspire to immortality’. Biologists fell with delight on the genome project, promising that mapping the genetic code would reveal,

finally, the secrets of who we are, and the origin of our diseases. In the event, the results were limited. Genes don’t ‘explain’ Mozart. They don’t even explain why we’re so different from a banana or a chimpanzee.

Are memories really stored in the brain? Is nature mechanical? Is matter unconscious? Dr Sheldrake shares Prof Dawkins’s reverence for Darwin, but points out that he—with his openness to amateur observation and bold curiosity—is exactly the sort of scientist we find hard to produce nowadays. There are places where science refuses to go, with signs already that the trumpeting of scientific omniscience is a kind of self-delusion, like any other bubble in stocks or housing.

Dr Sheldrake wants to bring energy and excitement back into science. With his popular experiments about homing pigeons, or dogs that seem to know when their masters are coming home, he has already done more than any other scientist alive to broaden the appeal of the discipline, and *COUNTRY LIFE* readers should get their teeth into this important and astounding book.

**Conservation**

**Green Philosophy**

Roger Scruton (Atlantic Books, £22, \*£18.50)

IN HIS PREFACE, Roger Scruton offers his arguments to reclaim the environmental high ground for the Right, ‘drawing on philosophy, psychology and economics, as well as on the writings of ecologists and historians’. Nothing has harmed the environment so much as revolutionary Socialism, he says, and points to the semantic connection between conservation and Conservatism.

Yet no Government can effectively legislate for the global problems that face us, and the ‘same people who promise vast schemes for clean energy... also promise vast schemes to expand airports’. To blame big business for destroying the environment, however, is to ‘mistake the effect for the cause’, which lies in our own consumer demands. And if State intervention does more harm than good, Prof Scruton reserves most scorn for the questionable policies of unaccountable non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Accountability is at the core of Prof Scruton’s argument: he supports the ‘fundamental moral idea to which conservatives attach great importance: the idea that those responsible for damage should also repair it’. The cost of mistakes should be returned to those who make them, he says, but accountability also lies with each one of us, in our daily lives.

Salvation lies in ‘oikophilia’, from the Greek for ‘love of home’, and the championing of Conservative values of tradition and heritage. *Oikos* is the root of our own ‘eco’, but in using this term, Prof Scruton divests it of its leftist accretions. Similarly, he praises what Burke called ‘little platoons’ and ‘civil associations’ such as the WI.

Ultimately, ‘we solve environmental problems... by creating the incentives that will lead people to solve them for themselves’. *Green Philosophy* is a *tour de force* that places the burden of responsibility on us all.

Teresa Levonian Cole

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