

CHARLES FOSTER

## More Morphic Resonances

Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work

By Rupert Sheldrake

(Coronet 328pp £20)

When Rupert Sheldrake's book *A New Science of Life* was published in 1981, Sir John Maddox, then editor of *Nature*, thundered that it was an 'infuriating tract' and 'the best candidate for burning there has been for many years'. Sheldrake had proposed that scientific laws should be regarded not as inflexible ordinances but as akin to habits, and that the behaviour of matter and organisms was at least influenced, if not determined, by a process he called 'morphic resonance'. Maddox, interviewed later about his outburst, was unrepentant. He was 'offended' by Sheldrake's work and said that it could be 'condemned in exactly the language that the Pope used to condemn Galileo, and for the same reason. It is heresy.'

Why such anger? Maddox's likening of Sheldrake to Galileo makes it obvious. For material reductionists, science isn't a method; it's a religion. But the faithful should beware. The old, comforting certainties have been shown to be half-truths. Genetic determinism is dead. We know that the operation of genes can be influenced by the environment, and goodness knows how wide the definition of 'environment' should be. C S Lewis wrote in *Surprised by Joy* that 'a young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading'. Quite right. No devout materialist, wishing to remain uncontaminated by reality, complexity or the rigours of the big picture, should read any of Sheldrake's books. And they certainly shouldn't let the latest, *Ways to Go Beyond*, through the door.

The book is an examination of seven practices: playing sports, relating to animals, fasting, using various mind-altering drugs and other techniques for inducing altered states of consciousness, prayer, participation in holy days and festivals, and the cultivation of good habits and active kindness. It's a sequel to his 2017 book *Science and Spiritual Practices*, in which he explored meditation, gratitude, reconnecting with the more-than-human world, relating to plants,

rituals, singing and chanting, and pilgrimage. Between them, the two books purport to locate some of the portals through which the territory of transcendence can be entered. All humans have an intimation of some transcendent reality, even if it is just a conviction that there are certain things that money can't buy, or that the meaning of life can't be found in the office or encoded in even the most powerful algorithm.

These aren't religious books. They're concerned with praxis, not theology. Sheldrake ranges widely. He tells us about aikido masters who can throw their opponents without touching them, about internet gaming disorder, about how the chances of rightly identifying a telephone caller out of four possibilities before picking up is overwhelmingly greater than 25 per cent – the figure you'd expect if it were down to probability alone. He notes, in a discussion of the benefits of fasting in relation to longevity, that if *E coli* bacteria are transferred from a nutrient-rich broth to a calorie-free medium they survive four times longer, and calculates that most Americans could walk from New York to Florida without eating anything at all. He introduces us to the UK's Cathedrals on Cannabis movement, whose devotees wander, stoned, around our Gothic masterpieces, and observes that all the delegates at the world's largest gathering of computer graphics professionals said that they took psychedelics and that this was important for their work. We discover that some atheists pray (and not just in crisis), that praying massively increases human longevity and that 72 per cent of Americans and 32 per cent of Britons believe in angels.

This is a very mixed bag. But all the practices Sheldrake examines are concerned with personal authenticity. Since we are quintessentially relational creatures, not the atomistic billiard balls of Hobbesian myth, we become more ourselves, not less, the more intimately we relate to the Other.

These practices, Sheldrake argues,



increase the porousness of our shells. They help us see our own place in the nexus – our glorious and scary state of contingency and dependency. To dissolve the shell is to move into the place that we call transcendence. We'll find, he says, that we share it with all other humans – and indeed all life. A

Stuttgart banker who loosens his tie and drinks ayahuasca will find himself in the same lush, vegetative Eden as the Peruvian shaman who drinks it.

If that's all too earnest, fine. Read the book just because it's funny, wise, full of whimsical weirdness and drawn from a mas-

sive hinterland of knowledge and reflection. Read it because it'll give you lots of strange stories to tell, and because it'll make you ontologically queasy, make you wonder what you are and make you easier to live with. *To order this book from the Literary Review bookshop, see page 34.*

## Gay Balls of Fire

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