

Does your pet ha

RUPERT SHELDRAKE is a biologist who has tried to turn the clock back. Unhappy and unconvinced by the reductionist science he learnt and once practised, he has created a new science of life which makes lots of other people see red.

His theory harks back to the days of sympathetic magic, when people believed that the actions of man were governed by mystical forces. Many, of course, still believe that, if the success of the astrology columns is any guide. But conventional scientists do not.

Sheldrake's form of magic is a force-field he calls "morphic resonance". This surrounds us all, he says, filling space and persisting through time, and determining our form and our behaviour. You can't see the field, only observe its effects.

In fact, he posits not one morphogenetic field, but billions, for every object echoes to its own special resonance. Chemists have often found that causing a new material to crystallise for the first time is much harder than doing it again.

Sheldrake would argue that it is the existence of the morphogenetic field, created by the first success, that makes subsequent successes easier.

By the same token, teaching rats to circumnavigate a maze in New York should make it easier for the same kind of rats to complete the task in London. Or it should be easier, when presented with two crosswords of equal difficulty, to complete the one that has been published in the paper and solved by others than the one that has never been published.

Scientists foam at the mouth when asked what they think of these ideas. Sheldrake's books, which have acquired cult status among New Ageists and other groups disaffected with modern science, are usually demolished in lordly style by scientific reviewers.



Rupert Sheldrake

David Jones, for example, reviewing one of them in *The Times*, said of the theory: "It is so vast and formless that it could easily be made to explain anything, or to dodge round any opposing argument..." Sheldrake has sadly aligned himself with those fantasists who, from the depths of their armchairs, dream up whole new grandiose theories of space and time to revolutionise all science, drape their woolly generalisations over every phenomenon they can think of, and then start looking round for whatever scraps of evidence that seem to them to be in their favour."

Part of this indignation derives from the fact that Sheldrake is not an outsider but a man who trained as a biochemist and cell biologist and held a Fellowship at Clare College, Cambridge. The heretic who was once a co-religionist is always hard to bear.

The fundamental scientific response to morphic resonance is that it fails the test of Occam's Razor, the premise on which modern science is based. This says, in essence, that a simple explanation should always be preferred to a complex one. For most of the phenomena called in aid by Sheldrake, simpler explanations exist.

Nonetheless, one of the charms of morphic resonance is that it does suggest all sorts of intriguing experiments. In one of them, people with no knowledge of Turkish were shown a well-known Turkish nursery rhyme, and a similar but nonsensical collection of Turkish words, which also rhymed. They preferred the nursery rhyme.

Results like these have been taken by some as "proofs" of Sheldrake's ideas, though to others they feel ominously like the evidence gathered for paranormal phenomena — elusive and unrepeatable. But there is no denying their entertainment value.

NIGEL HAWKES

In my home town, Newark-on-Trent, one of my neighbours was a widow who kept a cat. Her son was a merchant seaman. One day she told me that she always knew when her son was coming home on leave, even if he did not let her know when to expect him.

The cat went and sat on the front doormat and miaowed for an hour or two before he actually arrived. "So I always know when to start getting his tea ready." She was not the kind of woman to make such things up, although this story may well have improved in the telling.

Her matter-of-fact acceptance of this seemingly para-

normal phenomenon made me think. Was something strange really going on? Or was this just some sort of illusion, a product of superstitious, wishful, unscientific thinking? Or perhaps, the result of chance coincidence, subtle cues, sharp senses of smell and hearing, or simple routine. I soon found that many pet owners had similar tales to tell. In some cases the pets seemed to know hours beforehand about the return of a long-absent member of the family.

One example that cannot be explained in terms of routine expectations is from Mrs Jan Woody of Dallas, Texas:

"Our dog Cayce would

know when my husband or myself was leaving to come home. She would stop what she was doing, whether in the yard (she would ask to come inside) or in the house, and go sit by the front door at the exact minute my husband or myself left whatever activity we were attending. Sometimes my husband would call me to say he was leaving the courthouse and ask if Cayce had gone to sit by the door.

"Other times, we'd tell each other when we had left and asked if she had gone to sit by the door at that minute. She figured that, like barking to let us know the mail had just been delivered, this was one of her tasks. The practice held



true even if she was at my parents' home or at a motel or hotel. I don't see how she could hear our cars leave when they were in another city. I don't see how any sensory clues were provided to her, since neither my husband nor myself knew when the other was coming