

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The Sense of Being Stared At, and Other Aspects of the Extended Mind** by Rupert Sheldrake. Three Rivers Press, 2004. xii + 370 pp. \$13.95 (paper). ISBN 1-4000-5129-0.

Sheldrake's *The Sense of Being Stared At* provides a general, up-to-date overview of research in telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition. Accordingly, its subtitle (*And Other Aspects of the Extended Mind*) better conveys its breadth of coverage than the main title. The sense of being stared at constitutes only one of many phenomena discussed. The book, however, differs from other recent reviews of psi (e.g., Radin, 1997) in several distinctive ways. As Sheldrake says in the preface:

First, it is grounded in biology and animal behavior, and treats telepathy and other unexplained abilities as aspects of our biological, animal nature. Second, some books either bring together collections of stories or are rigorously experimental, excluding anything that has not been tested in the laboratory. I believe in combining both approaches. This book starts from the natural history of personal experiences, but wherever possible discusses experiments that can shed light on what is happening. Third, I show that scientific research on unexplained human powers can be done quite simply, and... I outline a variety of ways in which readers can take part in this research themselves. Fourth, ...instead of thinking of minds as confined to brains, I suggest they involve extended fields of influence that stretch out far beyond brains and bodies. (pp. ix-x)

For general readers interested in psi, Sheldrake's book is an entertaining but serious introduction to the field. For readers like me, who habitually turn first to Methods and Results sections, Sheldrake's approach requires patience and an adjustment of pace and mindset. His lavish attention to anecdotal accounts, case histories, and surveys of public beliefs in psi left me pleading "enough already, show me the data!" For "tough-minded" skeptical readers, Sheldrake's casual, naturalistic approach and his preferred research strategy of beginning with informal, incompletely controlled studies will probably lead them to reject his claims out-of-hand and to underestimate his skills as a scientist.

This last response would be unfortunate, because Sheldrake is, in fact, a competent experimenter and a knowledgeable scientist well versed in scientific epistemology. His peer-reviewed articles show the requisite attention to experimental methodology and, in my view, persuasively demonstrate anomalous effects. In his book, Sheldrake almost always points out alternative interpretations of the findings, briefly but accurately summarizes experimental work by others, and provides experimental details about his own studies in an appendix.

The two phenomena described in his book that Sheldrake has personally investigated most extensively are people's ability to detect when someone is staring at them and their ability to guess correctly who is calling them on the telephone ("telephone telepathy"). As Sheldrake notes, research on staring detection "was both initiated and set back for decades by two American

psychologists, E. B. Titchener and J. Edgar Coover" (p. 168). Both claimed to have shown that the sense of being stared at was illusory. Titchener concluded his 1898 article on the topic with the statement that "no scientifically-minded psychologist believes in telepathy. At the same time, the disproof of it in a particular case may start a student upon the straight scientific path, and the time spent may thus be repaid to science a hundredfold" (quoted in Sheldrake, p. 169). Titchener's paper was widely cited by skeptics for more than 100 years despite the fact that he provided neither experimental details nor data in support of his conclusion.

Sheldrake has been experimenting with this effect since 1986, with increasingly stringent controls for randomization and safeguards against sensory leakage. By 1999, he had accumulated 13,900 trials; participants were able to detect when someone was staring at them on 55% of the trials where 50% is the chance baseline, a result that is highly significant,  $p < 10^{-20}$ . Sheldrake also describes several successful replications of the experiment, including a computerized version of the experiment set up in an Amsterdam science museum. He acknowledges and describes the staring studies by Braud and his successors who use changes in a participant's skin resistance as the indicator of staring detection. Finally, Sheldrake responds to skeptical critiques of his staring studies and discusses the widely cited staring study by Wiseman and Schlitz (1997) in which Schlitz obtained positive results and (skeptical researcher) Wiseman obtained negative results within the same experiment, demonstrating the so-called "experimenter effect."

In his telephone telepathy studies, Sheldrake arranges to have one of four acquaintances of a participant phone at a designated time, and the participant attempts to guess which of the four is calling when the phone rings. Across 854 trials with 65 people who believed they could do this successfully, Sheldrake reports an overall success rate of 42%, where 25% is the chance baseline,  $p < 10^{-26}$ . He reports similar results using an e-mail protocol, where the participant must guess who the sender is one minute before the designated sending time.

Sheldrake is so confident that his experiments are easy to conduct and replicate successfully that he spells out modified procedures by which any reader of his book can try them out. Most of the psi researchers I know are not yet convinced that these effects are as easy to replicate as Sheldrake implies, even when attempted by professional psi researchers. (I already know of one recent failure by a veteran psi researcher to reproduce the staring detection effect.) Nevertheless, I hope that Sheldrake's confidence turns out to be warranted because it would be an important step toward greater acceptance of psi.

One of the distinctive features of the book is its theoretical framework. Sheldrake approaches the topic from the viewpoint of a biologist who believes that psi effects are normal evolutionary consequences of the "extended mind," consequences that can be plausibly traced back to the historical arms race between predator and prey. This perspective is reflected in Sheldrake's many case histories and experiments involving nonhuman animals that appear to display telepathy or precognition—including the ability to sense when they are being stared at and to anticipate when a telephone call comes from a familiar person. These animals

make several appearances throughout the book and are discussed more extensively in Sheldrake's earlier book, *Dogs that Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home, and Other Unexplained Powers of Animals* (Sheldrake, 1999).

Sheldrake's conceptual model, which he has presented in previous books, proposes that the mind extends beyond the brain (and the body) in the form of "morphic" fields that can interact with the fields of other minds. For example, Sheldrake argues against our "scientific" view that vision consists only of incoming information and for the more intuitive, "primitive" view that vision sends out information and energy that can influence the minds of others. Thus our ability to detect that someone is staring at us exemplifies our ability to detect the incoming information/energy field propagated by the other person's gaze. Morphic fields of the mind also extend across the time dimension, providing a parallel model for precognition.

Most readers of this book—including those who are already convinced that psi exists—honor the scientifically conservative practice of invoking psi as an explanation for a seemingly anomalous observation only as a last resort, only after all "normal" explanations have been ruled out. As a scientist, Sheldrake also knows that this is the game that must be played. But his belief that psi abilities are themselves normal biological functions frequently prompts him to abandon this reflexive conservative response and to speculate creatively about puzzling everyday events. My favorite example is his suggestion that our (alleged) ability to awaken ourselves just prior to an alarm clock's going off, even when it is set to go off at unaccustomed times, might reflect a precognitive response to an impending "alarming" intrusion. (He also proposes an experiment for testing this hypothesis.)

This kind of speculation is, of course, anathema to skeptics and inevitably provokes their derision, whereas I find it not only clever but transformative. Ironically, it is undoubtedly Sheldrake's naturalistic approach to the subject and his devoted attention to the psi of everyday life—all of which sorely tried my patience while reading this book—that generates the creative thinking that I so admire him for.

DARYL J. BEM  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, New York  
d.bem@cornell.edu  
<http://lldbem.ws>

### References

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