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Sheldrake and His Critics: The Sense of Being Glared At edited by Anthony Freeman. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. Vol. 12, No. 6, June 2005.

Rupert Sheldrake is a biologist and a former Research Fellow of the Royal Society and Fellow of Clare College Cambridge. For the past 20 years, he has conducted independent research and has written several books on psi and related topics. In his 2003 book, *The Sense of Being Stared At*, Sheldrake presents evidence for the existence of anomalous staring detection, the ability to detect the gaze of another person when normal sensory cues are not present. (My *JSE* review of the book is Bem, 2004.) This phenomenon and Sheldrake's proposed theoretical model of it are the focus of the special issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* here under review. The issue comprises two articles by Sheldrake, commentaries by 14 contributors, and Sheldrake's response to those commentaries.

In the first article, Sheldrake provides an updated review of the empirical research on staring detection. As he notes, tests of the phenomenon were both initiated and set back for decades by two American psychologists, E. B. Titchener and J. Edgar Coover. Both claimed to have shown that the sense of being stared at was illusory. 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 himself has been experimenting with this effect since 1986, with increasingly stringent controls for randomization and safeguards against sensory leakage. By 1999, he had accumulated nearly 14,000 trials across which participants successfully detected when someone was staring at them 55% of the time (50% is the chance baseline), a result that is highly significant, $p < 10^{-20}$. Sheldrake also reviews staring studies conducted by other investigators, especially the pioneering studies by William Braud and his collaborators. Finally, he reviews and critiques replication attempts by five skeptics who claim to have obtained either negative or artifactual results.

Two major questions are at issue here: Does the evidence show that anomalous staring detection actually exists and, if it does, does Sheldrake's conceptual model provide a plausible explanation for it?

Although the more skeptical commentators to this issue do not all agree, the answer to the first question appears to be yes; the effect appears to be genuine. There are two major experimental protocols for testing anomalous staring detection. The "CCTV" protocol rigorously excludes sensory cues by having a "starer" look at a "staree" over a closed-circuit video link, and it assesses staring detection by recording fluctuations in the staree's skin conductance. A previous meta-analysis of 15 such experiments provides significant evidence for the effect, a homogeneous distribution of effect sizes, and no evidence of a selective reporting problem (Schmidt et al., 2004; see also the earlier meta-analysis by Schlitz & Braud, 1997). The second protocol, the one typically used by Sheldrake himself, places the starer in physical visual proximity of the staree, and it assesses staring detection by having the staree verbally report on each trial whether or not he or she senses a feeling of being stared at. In his commentary, Dean Radin reports a meta-analysis of 60 experiments using this protocol. The analysis supports the reality of the effect. He also reports a separate subanalysis of the 10 studies that best controlled for sensory leakage. This yielded a homogeneous distribution of effect sizes and a weighted mean effect size substantially beyond chance expectation ($p = 5 \times 10^{-17}$).

Several of the critical commentaries focus on Sheldrake's proposed model of the staring-detection effect. In his previous writings, Sheldrake has proposed that the mind extends beyond the brain in the form of "morphic" fields that can interact with the fields of other minds. This not only provides a model of telepathy, but because morphic fields also extend across the time dimension, it also provides a model for precognition. His theory of vision, which he proposes as an explanation of anomalous staring detection, is a special case of this more general theory. In particular, he argues against the conventional "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 staring-detection ability reflects our

ability to detect an incoming information/energy field propagated by another person's gaze.

There are several problems with this theory. As Sheldrake himself acknowledges, it provides a better description of his own staring studies in which starers gaze directly at the staree than of the CCTV experiments in which the starer sees only a televised image of the starer. In fact, it is puzzling to me that Sheldrake insists on a visually mediated explanation at all, given his belief that morphic fields in general can mediate telepathy. As William Braud suggests in his commentary, "it seems more appropriate to conclude that staring detection may be one of many manifestations of the causal efficacy of remote *attention* and *intention*" (p. 68). This implies that the phenomenon is not necessarily visual at all. Indeed, one could test this by having the starer look at a photograph or at a time-lapsed televised image of the staree rather than the contemporaneous image. (Braud makes a similar suggestion in his commentary.) Other commentators (e.g., R. H. S. Carpenter) also question the necessity of Sheldrake's radical theory of vision for explaining the staring detection.

A deeper criticism of Sheldrake's theory is epistemological. Again, Braud makes the point well: "One wonders what the notion of a morphic or morphogenetic field really adds, in an explanatory sense, if such fields cannot be detected, operationalized, or characterized apart from reactions or outcomes that such field are invented to account for in the first place. Are such fields truly explanations or simply renamings of already observed outcomes and of things to be explained?" (p. 68).

In sum, the phenomenon of anomalous staring detection seems to me to be well established. Its explanation or mechanism, not so much.

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