

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dog Power

I generally enjoy Jonathan Yardley's reviews. An exception is the one on Rupert Sheldrake's *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home* (Book World, Oct. 3). I am a scientist who often has to deal with the misinformation and misunderstanding nonscientists have concerning science versus pseudoscience. ~~I have misunderstandings most nonscientists have concerning science versus pseudoscience.~~ I have not read Sheldrake's book, but judging from the review it contains the following basic errors:

Sheldrake claims that scientists dismiss psychic powers because they follow an arbitrary dogma that it is impossible. This is a sheer lie. Science never casually dismisses anything as impossible. What it demands is convincing evidence and sound analysis. The majority of the scientific community does not dismiss alien visitors because they are impossible but because, after decades of claims and searching, there is no convincing evidence that they exist. If an alien shows up or we receive a message from another solar system, science will accept the existence of aliens. Astrology has been rejected by science because repeated studies have failed to show that it works, so much so that it is scientific dogma that astrology is not real. Likewise, the hypothesis that the Earth is orbiting a nuclear reactor that we call the Sun is scientific dogma, because it is so well founded.

> People have claimed that psychic powers exist for thousands of years. A century of scientific investigation has repeatedly failed to demonstrate that they exist. No rigorous, repeated lab experiment has succeeded in showing significant results. This is telling, because if such abilities are as real as many claim then they should be easily demonstrated to be true. It is also important that psychics fail to actually do anything practical, like win lotteries (instead, they charge people to give out winning lottery numbers that almost invariably fail—if they can come up with winning numbers, then why don't they play them themselves, rather than make money by giving the numbers out?). I know magicians who can show how psychics are nothing more than frauds using basic tricks to fool people. The case for psychic powers has failed so miserably, and as been associated with such gross dishonesty, that scientists logically reject it and will no longer have anything to do with it unless someone comes up with a good reason to think otherwise.

All Sheldrake seems to offer are a bunch of interesting stories that cannot be confirmed or discounted. It is the same technique used by those who believe in alien encounters and other pseudoscience. Does he bother to note in his book that experiments have already been conducted on animals, with negative results? If Sheldrake wants to demonstrate psychic powers in animals, then he needs to do the work involved in executing repeatable lab experiments that show it is true. Otherwise he is wasting everyone's time. It's the old saying—either put up with something that is usable, or shut up.

An example. For years it was claimed that elephants communicate over long distances. Some speculated that it was via psychic powers. A few years ago it was discovered via careful experiments that elephants are actually using ultra low frequency sound (too low for people to hear). Now that's real science, not the lazy speculation people like Sheldrake engage in.

Had a scientist reviewed Sheldrake's book, he or she would have pointed out the methodological errors in his work, and thereby educated the public on the scientific process. This is very important because we are at a time when more Americans are sinking into superstitious ways of thinking, something I would think Jonathan Yardley would oppose. Such sloppy thinking is why they are rejecting evolution in Kansas, and why psychic hotlines are making the big bucks. Next time I would suggest getting some advice from a qualified scientists before reviewing such a book.

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