The Science Delusion - 10 Dogmas - Rupert Sheldrake

The ‘scientific worldview’ is immensely influential because the sciences have been so successful. They touch all our lives through technologies and through modern medicine. Our intellectual world has been transformed by an immense expansion of knowledge, down into the most microscopic particles of matter and out into the vastness of space, with hundreds of billions of galaxies in an ever-expanding universe.

Yet in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when science and technology seem to be at the peak of their power, when their influence has spread all over the world and when their triumph seems indisputable, unexpected problems are disrupting the sciences from within. Most scientists take it for granted that these problems will eventually be solved by more research along established lines, but some, including myself, think they are symptoms of a deeper malaise.

In this book, I argue that science is being held back by centuries-old assumptions that have hardened into dogmas. The sciences would be better off without them: freer, more interesting, and more fun.

The biggest scientific delusion of all is that science already knows the answers. The details still need working out but, in principle, the fundamental questions are settled.

Contemporary science is based on the claim that all reality is material or physical. Th ere is no reality but material reality. Consciousness is a by-product of the physical activity of the brain. Matter is unconscious. Evolution is purposeless. God exists only as an idea in human minds, and hence in human heads.

These beliefs are powerful, not because most scientists think about them critically but because they don’t. The *facts* of science are real enough; so are the techniques that scientists use, and the technologies based on them. But the belief system that governs conventional scientific thinking is an act of faith, grounded in a nineteenth-century ideology.

This book is pro-science. I want the sciences to be less dogmatic and more scientific. I believe that the sciences will be regenerated when they are liberated from the dogmas that constrict them.

The scientific creed

Here are the ten core beliefs that most scientists take for granted.

1. Everything is essentially mechanical. Dogs, for example, are complex mechanisms, rather than living organisms with goals of their own. Even people are machines, 'lumbering robots', in Richard Dawkins's vivid phrase, with brains that are like genetically programmed computers.
2. All matter is unconscious. It has no inner life or subjectivity or point of view. Even human consciousness is an illusion produced by the material activities of brains.
3. The total amount of matter and energy is always the same (with the exception of the Big Bang, when all the matter and energy of the universe suddenly appeared).
4. The laws of nature are fixed. They are the same today as they were at the beginning, and they will stay the same for ever.
5. Nature is purposeless, and evolution has no goal or direction.
6. All biological inheritance is material, carried in the genetic material, DNA, and in other material structures.
7. Minds are inside heads and are nothing but the activities of brains. When you look at a tree, the image of the tree you are seeing is not 'out there', where it seems to be, but inside your brain.
8. Memories are stored as material traces in brains and are wiped out at death.
9. Unexplained phenomena like telepathy are illusory.
10. Mechanistic medicine is the only kind that really works.

Together, these beliefs make up the philosophy or ideology of materialism, whose central assumption is that everything is essentially material or physical, even minds. This belief-system became dominant within science in the late nineteenth century, and is now taken for granted. Many scientists are unaware that materialism is an assumption: they simply think of it as science, or the scientific view of reality, or the scientific worldview. They are not actually taught about it, or given a chance to discuss it. They absorb it by a kind of intellectual osmosis.

In everyday usage, materialism refers to a way of life devoted entirely to material interests, a preoccupation with wealth, possessions and luxury. These attitudes are no doubt encouraged by the materialist philosophy, which denies the existence of any spiritual realities or non-material goals, but in this book I am concerned with materialism's scientific claims, rather than its eff ects on lifestyles.

In the spirit of radical scepticism, I turn each of these ten doctrines into a question. Entirely new vistas open up when a widely accepted assumption is taken as the beginning of an enquiry, rather than as an unquestionable truth. For example, the assumption that nature is machine-like or mechanical becomes a question: 'Is nature mechanical?' The assumption that matter is unconscious becomes 'Is matter unconscious?' And so on.

In the Prologue I look at the interactions of science, religion and power, and then in Chapters 1 to 10, I examine each of the ten dogmas. At the end of each chapter, I discuss what difference this topic makes and how it affects the way we live our lives. I also pose several further questions, so that any readers
who want to discuss these subjects with friends or colleagues will have some useful starting points. Each chapter is followed by a summary.

The credibility crunch for the 'scientific worldview'

For more than two hundred years, materialists have promised that science will eventually explain everything in terms of physics and chemistry. Science will prove that living organisms are complex machines, minds are nothing but brain activity and nature is purposeless. Believers are sustained by the faith that scientific discoveries will justify their beliefs. The philosopher of science
Karl Popper called this stance 'promissory materialism' because it depends on issuing promissory notes for discoveries not yet made. Despite all the achievements of science and technology, materialism is now facing a credibility crunch that was unimaginable in the twentieth century.