

Update 31

Is Vitalism a Strong Foundation or Quicksand?

During the WFC's 7th Biennial Congress in Orlando (May, 2003), a philosophy forum was held wherein the following topic was discussed: **Is Vitalism a Strong Foundation or Quicksand for the Chiropractic Profession?**

The moderators for the session were David Koch and Reed Phillips. A key note lecture titled, 'Is there a scientific basis for vitalism?' was given by David Peters MD (20 mins), then a different perspective was offered by each of 4 invited panellists (Ashley Cleveland, Gerard Clum, Cheryl Hawk, Charles Masarsky) (15 mins each), and finally a 30 minute open forum discussion took place.

The following are a number of brief excerpts from the keynote lecture by Dr. Peters, titled, 'Is there a scientific basis for Vitalism?'

David Peters, MD -

"...the vitalist story is about the body-mind experienced from the inside, whereas Biomedicine's is about the body as an object: in a post-modern world we must learn to live with conflicting accounts when both are useful. Having said that, there are signs that science, realizing the limitations of an exclusively analytic approach and developing a greater interest in synthesis, could reveal the bio-physical basis for holism."

"...arguably the most significant reason (*to explain why Vitalism still lives*) is that Science could be reaching a point where the traditional chasm between vitalism and mechanism has begun to narrow. I might even go so far as to suggest that Science is preparing the basis for a new vitalism. Its green shoots are what this paper is about."

" Science now offers new ways of imagining how life flows through us and between us. In the light of these ideas the notion of innate intelligence appears to have been ahead of its time."

"I am indebted to Professor Mike Hyland for his insights into the body-mind as a network, and his 'intelligent body' hypothesis for I believe it provides a conceptual bridge between information theory and vitalistic ideas. Michael, who is Professor of health psychology working at the Peninsular University in Plymouth, England, explains how according to complexity theory, complex systems function in fundamentally different ways from simple ones. To précis his paper: any network of massively interconnected causal nodes can have the special properties associated with intelligence. The central nervous system is a perfect example so we mistakenly assume intelligence to be exclusively brain-based. The modern view has of course been that the brain is intelligent and the body is dumb, but if the whole body is intelligent, then intelligent processes commonly attributed to mind may occur throughout the non-brain body. Hyland suggests that as in any complex system, intelligence and memory are distributed throughout the whole and he proposes that chronic illnesses are due to self-organizing learning error in the brain-body system."

"What we can see coming together are elements for a scientific model of the organism as a living matrix integrated and shaped by an incalculable traffic of regulatory information encoded in many different ways, some slow, some extremely fast. Such a flow of organizing information resembles what the vitalists imagined as vital energy, except rather than involving a single, distinct and subtle life force, this information flow is modulated by the forces science knows about: the organism's electromagnetic flux, its clouds of neuro-receptor traffic, its rhythmic impulses of sound, heat, gravity, elasticity, and pressure. Science is now in a position to explore how such a flow of vibrant information might be encoded in this living matrix."

"The world seen through the eyes of 21st Century science is quite different from the mechanical, mindless universe science once depicted. Formerly, it was only vitalistic therapies who claimed to dissolve the boundaries between mind and body, self and world, practitioner and patient: but

Scientists are now proposing that the human organism has qualities of innate intelligence - that it is a living matrix of information - and neuroscience is exploring how the whole organism generates consciousness.”

Reference:

Peters D. Is there a scientific basis for Vitalism? Conference proceedings of the WFC's 7th biennial congress. Orlando, Florida, USA, May 1-3, 2003. pp. 117-31.