

SURVIVAL

A RECONSIDERATION

THE SIXTEENTH
FREDERIC W. H. MYERS MEMORIAL LECTURE
1966

by
E. GARTH MOORE

SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

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E. GARTH MOORE

The author of the sixteenth Frederic W. H. Myers Memorial Lecture is both a barrister-at-law and a clerk in Holy Orders. He has been a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, since 1947, and is College Director of Studies and Lecturer in law. In 1961 he was visiting Professor of Law at Khartoum University; and he has been Chairman of both the Huntingdon and the Cambridgeshire Quarter Sessions. He is Chancellor of the Dioceses of Durham, Southwark and Gloucester, and is also a Church Commissioner. His publications include the 8th edition of Kenny's *Cases in Criminal Law* and (jointly) the sections on Ecclesiastical Law in Halsbury's *Laws of England* (3rd edition). He has also contributed to legal and theological journals. He has long been interested in the problems of psychical research; and since 1963 he has been the President of the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies

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London
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The purpose of the Society for Psychical Research, which was founded in 1882, is to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognized hypothesis. The Society does not hold or express corporate views. Any opinions expressed in its publications are, therefore, those of the authors alone.

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THE invitation to give the Myers Memorial Lecture is as embarrassing as it is flattering. When I reflect on the greatness of F. W. H. Myers — for he was indeed a great man — when I contemplate the distinction of those who before me have given this lecture, when I regard the far too expert audience which it is my privilege to address, I wonder what I, the merest amateur, can possibly contribute of value to psychical researchers. The only remote qualification which I have for the task, and it is very remote, is that I come from that cradle of serious Psychical Research, Cambridge, and that as a Fellow of Corpus, I am, in a sense, the part-owner of Leckhampton, the house which Myers occupied and which the College now uses as a hostel for research students, close to the home of the Sidgwicks.

Having been instructed by the Society for Psychical Research to speak about Survival, and having no original research of my own to contribute, I have decided instead to invite you to join with me in a reconsideration of the subject. It seems to me that we have reached something of an *impasse*, and that, unless we can find some new track to pursue, we are not likely to get much further.

In 1929 Sir Oliver Lodge in giving this lecture* said of Myers, 'To us he has handed the torch. . . . We have done our best to carry on and to leave to our successors a reasonable and cautious but progressive course of action. We move too slowly for some, too quickly for others, but on the whole we move.' Do we? I wonder. It is a mark of Myers's greatness that he has anticipated so much which was not to be established until after he was gone. In the field of survival, for all we know today, 65 years after Myers's death, I should say that we had scarcely moved at all. This is not to denigrate the efforts or ingenuity of researchers in this field, nor to under-value the material which they have collected. It is simply to state that we know very little more today than we knew then. The one significant exception is the work of Professor Hornell Hart and his team, reported in 'Six

* *Conviction of Survival*, by Sir Oliver Lodge, p. 6 (Methuen & Co. Ltd.).

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Theories about Apparitions'.* You will recall that he, or they, conceived the brilliant idea of comparing phantasms of the living with phantasms of the dead. By discovering that, in the case of phantasms of the living, the person who appeared (the apparition) was conscious that he had done so and of the scene which presented itself to the apparition, it was possible to draw a tentative conclusion that, in the otherwise similar case of phantasms of the dead, there might be consciousness also. This strikes me as truly significant and the nearest approach to a break-through in this century in the important, though narrow, field of survival.

Let me hasten to add that, on a wider, over-all view, I think that we *have* progressed.

The study of Alchemy was, in itself, sterile; but it led to the fruitful field of Chemistry, just as Astrology led to Astronomy. The search for the philosopher's stone which would transmute base metals into gold was a failure so far as the direct search was concerned. Indeed, the quest itself was scarcely a worthy one. But it played an enormous part in opening up other avenues of exploration into the physical nature of the Universe, with the result that today we are nearer to possessing the secret of the philosopher's stone than ever before. With our greatly deepened understanding of the basic nature of matter (protons and electrons and molecules and atoms, engaged in their differenced and characteristic dances around each other), we are beginning to see the essential one-ness of all matter, so that we can almost say, 'Change the pattern of the dance and you have changed the ultimate nature of the resulting substance'. We have, further, grown out of thinking that gold is the optimum in desirable objectives. More important still, we have begun to realize that perhaps there is no sharp dichotomy between matter and spirit, and that there may even be something in Sir Oliver Lodge's suggestion that 'animation is a slowing down'† which I interpret as meaning that the material is a slowing-down of the dance which, when it goes too fast for our apprehension, we call the spiritual. Most important of all, natural scientists have begun to realize that purely material explanations are not sufficient.

* *Proc. S.P.R.* 50 (1956), pp. 153-239.

† *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

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As with the alchemist's search for gold, so with the psychological researcher's search for the proof of survival. The search has led to very little progress along the direct path which we have sought to follow. But it has opened up to us other fields, both psychological and parapsychological, which have already led us, and may in time lead us further, to a deeper understanding of the problem of survival. Furthermore, just as we have learnt that the search for gold may be misconceived, so we may eventually conclude that our sometimes egocentric desire not to be snuffed out, together with our initial rather crude concept of survival, need refining. Survival, if it be a fact, is, at a guess, something more than just the continuation of a soul which is naked because it has shed its clothing of flesh. Whatever, if anything, survives may well differ from the person we knew on earth as greatly as the oak-tree differs from the acorn. When one is engaged on a search, it is as well to know what it is for which one is looking. We may otherwise easily miss the significance of the oak-tree, if all the time we think that what we are seeking is an acorn.

What, in fact, do we mean by survival? What is it which we think may survive? What is the event beyond which we think that this something may survive? What do we mean by death? What do we mean by life?

Not so long ago we thought that we could answer some at least of these questions. We thought we knew what we meant. Now we are not so sure.

Death certainly seemed to be a clearly marked event. When the heart stopped beating and the breathing ceased, a man was dead, and that was that. Today the art of surgery, allied with medicine and nursing, has advanced to such a pitch that the heart can be started again, and even for a time dispensed with altogether in the operating-theatre, while the breathing can be continued indefinitely in the hospital-ward by artificial means. A man today may receive such injuries to his brain that his body can lie for years, an inert and apparently profoundly and irrevocably unconscious mass in human form, fed artificially by drip or stomach-tube and supplied with air by a mechanical substitute for the lungs. Is such a patient still alive?

Let me give you two true and contrasting cases. To those of

you who may have heard them from me before, I apologise. They are, however, so apposite that I must repeat them.

The first is of a man who had received such severe head injuries in a car accident that the surgeons said that he would never recover consciousness. He lay for months in bed, fed artificially by the nurses. Then his wife wrote to her bishop and asked, in all seriousness, 'Is he really alive?' The hospital authorities obviously thought that he was, or else they would have ceased their care of him.

The second case is of a man who was knocked down by a drunken sailor and taken to hospital unconscious, where they operated on his head and put him to bed, still unconscious. For 14 hours all went well and then his breathing ceased. He was put into an artificial breathing-machine and kept there for 24 hours. One of his kidneys was then removed and transplanted into the body of another patient who was in need of a kidney. As soon as the kidney had been removed from the first patient, the artificial breathing-machine was switched off, with the result that, within a short space of time, he was undoubtedly dead. The hospital staff maintained that they had not killed him, for, they said, he had died when his breathing stopped for the first time.

Were they right in saying that he was already dead? Were the surgeons who treated the victim of the car accident right in thinking that their patient was still alive?

We no longer know for certain what we mean by death. We have been unaware for even longer of what we mean by life.

When does life, or, at least, human life begin? Is it at conception, or at quickening, or when the foetus becomes viable, or at birth? Or is it at yet some other time? Your answer to this question may well determine your attitude to the current proposals for the amendment of the Law with regard to abortion.

These are problems on which I happen recently to have been engaged. I have been one of a team of theologians, doctors, philosophers, lawyers and others who have together sought to unravel these problems under the aegis of the Board for Social Responsibility of the Church of England and such conclusions

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as we have reached have been published and are available.* Our immediate concern was with the ethical and legal problems posed by our uncertainty as to when life begins and when it ends and not with the question of survival. But, among other things, our quest has taught us how much we do not know. Since, then, we are so ignorant concerning the nature of life, it is scarcely surprising that we have not made much progress in our investigations concerning survival.

If survival be a fact (and the search for proof of it postulates at least the possibility of something which survives the disintegration of flesh and bone — a something which we might as well call a soul), what is the genesis of the soul? We tend to imagine that the creation of a new body by procreation is at least linked with the creation of a new soul. But is it? The hypothesis of survival implies the suggestion that the disintegration of the physical body does not involve the disintegration of the soul. Why, then, should the creation — the procreation — of a new body be tacitly assumed to be also the beginning of a new soul? It may be so, and it may be that soul and body grow together until such time as the soul sloughs off the body as a snake sloughs off its skin. But we must face the fact that we really know nothing of the genesis of the soul. We should take account of the suggestion made by Whateley Carington when he gave this lecture in 1935.† ‘Let us try to purge our minds,’ he said, ‘of all preconceptions and think of the beginning of all things as a state of pure undifferentiated Consciousness — which is tantamount to nothingness — and of the only act of creation, if you wish to call it so, as the coming into being of what I have called singularities in this undifferentiated field. I do not know quite what this means, for we are attempting to think at a level at which meaning itself is meaningless. . . .’ I, too, do not know quite what he meant, and I should be the last person to offer any adverse criticism on that score of what he had to say. If I understand him aright, he was getting very near to a Buddhist or Hindu view of the nature of life as a progress from the Absolute back to the Absolute.

* *Decisions about Life & Death: A Problem in Modern Medicine and Abortion: An Ethical Discussion*, each 4/6d., published by The Church Information Office, Church House, Westminster, S.W.1.

† *The Meaning of Survival*, p. 29.

Our monetary system is such that money flows from the Bank and passes through many channels back to the Bank. In like fashion water is gathered from the ocean to which by myriad streams it ultimately returns. So with other things. Even our bodies may be said to spring from and be nourished by the dust to which they ultimately return. Whateley Carington, I think, is suggesting that our consciousness may come from a common bank of consciousness to which it ultimately returns, and that this to some extent explains telepathy and clairvoyance as being a tapping of this common fund. While I have considerable reservations concerning this suggestion, and while in particular I think that great caution should be employed in applying to the psychic any analogy drawn from the physical, his suggestion is one to which psychical researchers should give further consideration.

The point I wish to make is this. We seem to have reached an *impasse* on the route along which we have been attempting to travel. We ought at least to look around for another route. Like mountaineers who find their further progress upward barred, we need not go right back to the beginning, but we must go back some distance. We shall certainly avail ourselves of the experiences already gained. But we shall look for another route upwards. So far we have started with the assumption that a human being has a personality, and that this personality, under the name of the soul, is distinct from, though intimately related to, his physical body; that at some point of time in the creation of that body it informs the body from outside; and that it is not wholly dependent on the body, but goes on after the disintegration of that body. Heretofore we have concentrated on its survival of the body, and we have not got very far. Ought we not now, still on the assumption that it exists, to concentrate on what it is and whence it comes? It may well be that we shall not get very far along this alternative route either; but the search may well open up to us some hitherto unsuspected vista of the goal we are seeking to attain.

How are we to do it? I do not know. But I suggest that consideration be given to it. As a beginning we might, with a medium, try an experiment on someone whose physical body is apparently just ticking over — on one of those patients who

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appear to be profoundly and permanently unconscious, in whom the higher centres of the brain have been irreparably destroyed — one of those patients of whom we say, 'Is he really alive?' It is an experiment which will call for a good medium (by no means easy to find) and careful organisation, into the details of which I shall not now attempt to go. It is one which perhaps should not be first attempted on the apparently permanently unconscious patient, but should be tried first on someone who is deep in natural sleep, for, with such a subject, if we were to get any results, we should have the advantage that some of them might be susceptible to subsequent checking with the subject after the awakening.

In seeking to make contact with the soul of an apparently unconscious individual, if we make any progress at all, my guess is that we shall be up against many of the same problems which we have already encountered in our attempts to communicate with persons after death. If the medium scores significant hits, we shall then have to consider whether they really point to communication with the soul of the subject or whether they do no more than demonstrate the *psi* faculty of the medium. We shall have the same difficulty in excluding telepathy emanating from others as we have already encountered. If we succeed in excluding telepathy, in the case of anything verifiable by subsequent investigation we shall be up against the bug-bear of precognition. It is a bug-bear which, so far as I can see, can never be wholly scotched. It can, at best, be overwhelmed by a balance of probabilities, as I personally think that it has been overwhelmed in some cases, for example, in the cross-correspondence cases.

Such experiments may prove wholly unfruitful and will certainly not be easy. Even so, they will be far more easy than any experiment aimed at discovering the genesis of personality or of consciousness or of the soul. Logically, I suppose that mediumistic communication could be attempted with a foetus at different stages in its development. It would certainly be interesting to attempt such communication with a sleeping infant. But at the moment I do not see how the veridity of such communications is ever to be established. Something akin to this is to be found in Tibet, where a belief in reincarnation

prevails. In the search for the reincarnated Dalai Lama, for example, the child is tested by being given the former Dalai Lama's personal possessions together with other articles and the test consists of seeing whether he can pick out the right ones.

In any such investigations as I have tentatively suggested, I suspect that, at least at first, we shall have to be content with seeing whether we get any results without worrying overmuch about the evidential value of these results. Indeed, I sometimes wonder whether we may not have spent too much time and labour in the search for evidence. This may sound odd coming from a lawyer. If the Society for Psychical Research could dub anything as heretical, this would be heresy, for the Society exists 'to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit' certain faculties. Let me, therefore, explain what I do mean.

I must confess to having some reserves about anyone's ability to examine anything entirely without prejudice or prepossession. It is abundantly clear that members of the S.P.R., like the rest of mankind, are divided into two clearly marked categories — those who are able to believe in the unusual and those who are not. To the former a supernormal explanation sometimes provides the most economical hypothesis. To the latter, the most far-fetched explanation on normal, material lines is always the more economical. But both factions are at one in the value they place upon evidence. So am I. There are, however, two respects in which I think that I may part company with a number of my fellow-members.

The first is that I feel pretty sure that a good deal of time has been wasted in re-proving what has already been abundantly proved, for example telepathy and precognition, about neither of which is it, in my opinion, reasonable any longer to entertain any doubts so far as their existence is concerned, though there is ample room for exploration regarding their mechanics.

The second point at which I may part company from some of our number is with regard to the nature of the evidence which we can ever hope to obtain, or, at any rate, which we can hope to obtain in the foreseeable future. It is not without significance that the date of the foundation of our Society is 1882 — a time when, after centuries of stagnation, the natural sciences had

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made a great break-through, with the promise, still being abundantly fulfilled today, of apparently limitless further advances. We do well to remember the many, many centuries which have preceded the present era — centuries in which man's knowledge of the universe around him scarcely increased at all. Compare those centuries with the present age in which almost every day witnesses quite enormous forward leaps and bounds in the realm of the material sciences. No wonder that in 1882 the founders of the S.P.R. looked with admiration on the scientific method. No wonder that, quite rightly, they sought to apply to the investigation of the psychic the same methods as had been applied to the material. But I sometimes wonder whether, in doing so, a factor has not been left out of account. The material sciences are concerned with what can be measured or weighed. Psychological Research is concerned with what cannot be measured or weighed. It is true that it is concerned with the point where the immeasurable or imponderable impinges on the material; and it is possible that we may be able to measure or weigh the impingement. Logically, we should be able to do so. But that would seem as far as we can go. We should surely recognize that we often need a totally different and less direct method of measuring. Electricity cannot be measured like beer in a pint-pot. The elaborate and indirect method of passing it through a meter must be employed. Some things do not lend themselves to measurement at all. Our ability to recognize acquaintances by a totality of personal idiosyncracies is an example and one which is very relevant to proof of survival. We often have no doubt about a person's identity; but the factors which contribute to this certainty are innumerable and imponderable. In dealing with the psychic, while remaining as critical as when dealing with the material, we cannot expect always to collect our evidence in the same way as we do when dealing with the material. There are times when the scientist's desire for exactitude must give way to the lawyer's assessment of a balance of probabilities. It is interesting to note that, in the higher reaches of the material sciences, researchers today are far more ready than they were in 1882 to think in philosophic terms, bordering at times on the religious. I wonder whether psychological researchers should not sometimes do the same, even

at the risk of being mistaken for over-credulous spiritists. This is a real risk of which psychical researchers have been very conscious — perhaps over conscious.

Psychical research has had a hard task to get itself recognized as respectable in scientific circles. In its efforts to do so it may perhaps have shown a tendency to treat Theology in as cavalier a fashion as Psychical Research has experienced at the hands of natural scientists and with as little justification. It must be admitted that theologians have given but little encouragement to psychical researchers. Psychical researchers have had to face rejection on two fronts. Ignored or condemned by theologians and charged with eccentric credulity by natural scientists, they have indeed found themselves ground between the upper and the nether millstones. This is altogether regrettable and is an example of a larger tendency towards specialization. In truth Psychical Research should be the meeting-point between the Natural Sciences and Theology. If each of the three were to show a proper respect for the others, doors might suddenly fly open which hitherto have been closed. I am sure that Theology has much to learn from both Psychology and Parapsychology. I am sure that Religion (which I do not confuse with Theology, despite their close relationship) has been considerably strengthened by Psychical Research. In passing, it is to be noted that in the Church of England once again controversy has broken out concerning the propriety of prayers for the dead. These are generally held to be laudable; but a small and extreme Protestant school of thought is vocal in its assertions that on death the soul goes straight to Heaven or to Hell and that, both states being irrevocable, prayers for the departed are misconceived. This is not the occasion for an examination of this controversy. But both sides are at one in a belief in survival. The controversy is concerned with the state of that survival and it is a point on which Psychical Research may be able eventually to throw some light.

But, if Theology can, and I think does, derive benefit from Psychical Research, Psychical Research can in my opinion derive benefits from Theology. In my view one of the reasons why progress in Psychical Research is slow, and particularly in that branch of it which is concerned with survival, is because of

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the fact that Psychological Researchers have failed to take into account Theology, especially Christian Theology. They have been less slow to take account of Far Eastern theologies, perhaps because of the exotic nature of some of their manifestations, such as Yoga. The failure to take account of Theology is due to the researchers' laudable attempt to be strictly scientific. They have unfortunately equated Science with Natural Science. That is an inadequate equation and, as a result, as scientists they have been inadequate. As the Dean of St. Paul's said when he delivered this lecture in 1940, 'Scientific research on the history of religion has taken for granted that nothing can happen which is undreamt of in Herbert Spencer's philosophy'.* The same may often be said of Psychological Research and the type of evidence which psychological researchers seek. Dr. Matthews was making a plea that different disciplines should take account of each other and that, if they would do so, it would be to their mutual advantage. 'No one who understands what he is about,' said Dr. Matthews, 'would suppose that there could be a purely empirical argument for Theism or that God could be the conclusion of an investigation by scientific methods. This does not mean that empirical data do not play a necessary part in the argument for Theism; they are the starting-point, for example, of the famous Cosmological and Teleological proofs.' I would respectfully echo this and express the view that in fact Psychological Research has already contributed to Theology by demonstrating that the obviously material is not the only thing with which we have to reckon.

At the moment, however, my concern is not with what Psychological Research may have to contribute to Theology, but with what Theology has to contribute to Psychological Research. The history of Christianity is full of stories of the miraculous or paranormal. Nor is Christianity alone in this. How, in the name of reason, can it possibly be said to be 'scientific', except in a debased sense of that word, to ignore all this when one is considering the question of survival? I am not overlooking the value of evidence which owes nothing to religion or philosophy, but rests solely on the same basis as the study of what can be weighed or measured. As a discipline pure and simple it has its

* *Psychical Research and Theology*, by Dr. W. R. Matthews, pp. 5 and 6.

merits. But as a means of seeking to arrive at an ultimate truth which is thought to be metaphysical, it must surely be deficient.

Let me sum up my conclusions.

1. With the possible exception of the contribution made by Professor Hornell Hart and his team, we have not got very far since the time of Myers either in disproving survival or in proving it and discovering anything about its nature.
2. We need, therefore, to try a new line of approach.
3. A new line could be an attempt to discover the nature of the soul, its link with the physical body, when that link is first forged and when it is finally broken. This involves a consideration of when an individual life begins and when death comes to end it. One suggested step towards this might be to try through a medium to establish contact with unconscious persons — at both extremities of their manifest existence on this earth — both with those who are simply asleep and with those who appear irrevocably to have lost consciousness.
4. At the same time we should reconsider our evidential criteria. We should not waste time in re-proving what has already been abundantly proved. We should not necessarily expect to be able to measure and weigh the psychic in the same way as we do the material.
5. In making our speculations and then setting to work on them and also in assessing the value of our results, we should not ignore what Theology may have to tell us.

Finally, I should not like to terminate this somewhat discursive discourse without some affirmation of my own beliefs, or else I may lay myself open to misconstruction.

I do believe in survival after death. I do so primarily on theological grounds, because I believe in the promises and power of the risen Christ, which I hold to be a reasonable faith firmly based on historical fact. I hold that this belief has been considerably strengthened by Psychical Research. Psychical Research alone has not incontrovertibly established survival, for so often telepathy and precognition provide logically possible alternative explanations. But, on a balance of proba-

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bility, these alternatives should often be rejected as too far-fetched to be economical; and this is especially true in the instances of cross-correspondence. In any event, the *psi* factor in the medium is firmly demonstrated, and the very existence of this *psi* factor in a living human strengthens the probability of survival, by showing that there is in us something more than the obviously material.

Though our progress may be slow, the time spent on Psychical Research has not been wasted. With perseverance further doors will open.

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