IN WHAT SENSE IS SURVIVAL DESIRABLE?

C. D. BROAD, M.A.

§ 1. THE question that I propose to discuss in this paper concerns a purely hypothetical state of affairs. I do not intend to consider whether there be any reason to believe that all or some human beings survive the death of their bodies. I simply wish to analyse the notion of survival; to see how far we should be justified in taking a more cheerful view of the world if it be true; and, in particular, to inquire which parts of this complex notion are relevant to the question of optimism or pessimism, and which are not. But, before opening the main discussion, I must say something about the connection between the desirability and the probability of survival. In my opinion there is none. If it could be conclusively proved that the world would be very bad without survival and very good with it, this would not have the slightest bearing on the question whether survival is a fact. All arguments of this sort have been refuted in principle by Dr M'Taggart in his *Dogmas of Religion*; there is nothing to add to his criticisms, they have merely to be adapted to meet particular forms of this fallacious argument as they arise.

Survival, if believed in at all, must be believed in either for no reason, or on authority, or on general philosophical grounds not involving ethical considerations, or on empirical evidence such as that discussed by the S.P.R. Neglecting the first form of belief, which is irrelevant to anyone who does not happen to have it, and the second, which would take us too far afield, I will make a few remarks about the third. Here again M'Taggart is one of the very few modern philosophers who have seen clearly the points involved. He sees that there are two questions—one empirical and one *a priori*. The *a priori* part is the attempt to prove that certain

factors in the universe must be permanent. The empirical part is the attempt to identify human beings with some of these. It seems to me that M'Taggart's actual argument in his *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology* fails on both counts; but this does not prove that all such arguments must do so. Nevertheless, I feel little doubt that they will. It seems pretty clear that things about which propositions can be proved *a priori* have not that kind or degree of complexity which characterises a human mind, and that propositions which can be proved *a priori* do not make assertions about existence or permanence. This may seem a dogmatic statement; but familiarity with propositions which are certainly *a priori*, such as those of mathematics and logic, does, I think, lead one to feel that a proposition asserting that minds do (or do not) last for ever, and claiming to be *a priori*, is as incongruous as a purple quadratic equation or a virtuous gamma function.

I conclude, then, that any evidence for survival must come from psychical research, and therefore must be empirical, not merely in the sense in which there would be an empirical element even in M'Taggart's argument, but in the sense in which the evidence for the wave-theory of light or the formula of benzene is empirical. By this I mean that survival must be a hypothesis to explain certain special and peculiar facts, and that the only *a priori* element in the argument is the laws of logic and probability used in the hypothetical method and therefore common to all the sciences of nature.

§ 2. Now, this conclusion, if true, is important. It means that, if we ever have any evidence for survival at all, it will not merely be evidence for survival in the abstract, but for some particular kind of survival. Any facts which lead us to believe that a certain person has survived bodily death must enable us to form some view, though it may be a very inadequate and precarious one, as to whether he has gone up or down in the scale intellectually or morally. There are, in fact, some general principles which could be applied to such cases. If the communications be above the normal intellectual level of the person whom we assume to be sending them, it is *as* safe to suppose that he has risen in the intellectual scale as that he is communicating at all. If they be below his normal intellectual level, it is not *as* safe to assume that he has fallen intellectually as that he is really communicating, for it is reasonable to take account of the shock of bodily death, the imperfections of the instrument, and the possible lack of skill of the supposed communicator.

The importance of this consideration is that we shall never

in practice have to discuss the value of survival wholly in the abstract, since any evidence for supposing it to be true at all will also be evidence for supposing it to be of such and such a kind. Applying these considerations to the mass of facts accumulated by the S.P.R., I think it is reasonable to say that, *if* they point to survival at all, they point on the whole in no way to intellectual improvement in the departed (though they leave this possible), but that they do not point so strongly to general intellectual degeneration as the uncritical sometimes suppose. Moreover, the one set of facts—the "Myers" cross-correspondences—which most strongly suggests survival also strongly suggests ingenuity and initiative of a fairly high order. I think, therefore, that we are free to discuss the desirability of survival on the assumption that, if it takes place at all, there is no strong reason to think that the survivor is intellectually much better or much worse a few years after his death than he was a few years before. As to the moral characteristics that are to be assumed in survivors, I think we have no means of judging. Some communications contain elevated (but, to my mind, rather "twaddling") rhetoric, others contain obscenity. But, as it would be impossible to form any very valuable opinion of the character of an ordinary man from the mere fact that he habitually talked in an elevated style (as did Mr Jabez Balfour), or that he habitually told bleak stories (as did Sir Robert Walpole), I think that such communications leave us completely in the dark as to whether, if people survive, they improve or degenerate morally. We may therefore take as a reasonable hypothesis the view that, if people survive bodily death at all, they are neither much better nor much worse morally shortly after that event than they were shortly before. I can certainly see nothing in the communications to warrant the Catholic view that they are all due to evil spirits; if it be true, the practice of pulling the legs of psychical researchers must surely be among their more innocent amusements and not their more serious business—unless my Lord Chesterfield's remark to the Garter King-of-Arms applies very forcibly to the fallen angels.

§ 3. These matters being settled, let us reflect why we regard death as an evil, and how far survival of the kind mentioned would remove the sting of death. We may regard the fact that all men are mortal from three altitudes. (1) We may consider the objection which each of us has to his own death. (2) We may consider our objection to the deaths of our friends. And (3) we may consider our objection to the death of the human race. Let us discuss these points in order.

§ 4. I suppose that, in some sense, we all dread our own death. But this dread is of a very different intensity in different people who have the same powers of reflection and imagination. Moreover, it can coexist in an acute form (as it did in Dr Johnson) with a lively belief in human survival. These facts suggest that probably there is a good deal of confusion in men's dread of their own death, and that the phrase probably covers a number of fears directed towards wholly different objects. Our first task will be to analyse the dread of death and distinguish the various fears which it may include.

First we must distinguish between the fear of dying and the fear of being dead. It is perfectly reasonable for anyone to fear dying, for the process of dying is often very painful, and it is always accompanied by weakness and the control of oneself by external things or by other people. And there are some ways of dying which are specially hateful from their inherent lack of dignity. Any death by slow suffocation seems to me peculiarly horrible for this reason. The impulse to try to breathe as long as possible is too primitive to be overcome by the will. Hence death by suffocation involves a hopeless struggle between an uncontrollable impulse and external nature, which will go on to the bitter end in spite of our desire to submit ourselves with dignity to the inevitable. Such a struggle is degrading in itself and hideous in its external manifestations, and we are quite right to regard it with loathing. Now, whether we survive death or not, we shall all die, and many of us will die from suffocation. Hence, the fear of dying (as distinct from that of being dead) is a reasonable one, and is independent of a belief in survival.

§ 5. On the other hand, the fear of being dead must depend for its rationality very largely on whether we do or do not expect to survive, and on what we expect our future state to be if we survive. Let us suppose, first, that we definitely disbelieve in survival. We cannot then rationally *fear* being dead, though we can rationally regret the cessation of our life if it promised at the time of dying to contain in the future a balance of good. If we die in old age, when our best work is done and our chances of future health and happiness are small, there is nothing to fear in being dead and little to regret in dying, on the present view. But many people who do not expect to survive fall into a confusion about their own death. They tend to think of themselves in the future as being at once really dead and yet able to contemplate their own loss and deadness. This, however, is a mere confusion,

it is tantamount to assuming a definite and exceptionally depressing view about survival. The great consolation about a firm belief in one's own extinction is that one knows the worst, and that the worst—so far as concerns oneself—is not particularly bad.

§ 6. Let us next assume a doubt about the certainty of extinction, together with no positive view as to the nature of survival if we survive at all. Such a view really does add two terrors to death. (1) There is the terror of strangeness which must, in practice, attach to death on any view of survival. If we survive at all, we are bound to pass through very unfamiliar circumstances after having adapted ourselves so long to life in the body. It is reasonable to shrink from what is strange and unfamiliar; and part of our shrinking from death, if we think survival probable or even possible, is the shrinking which a boy feels on going for the first time to a public school. This source of fear attaches to all views of survival, however detailed and cheerful they may be. If I were certain that, as soon as I died, I was to be triumphantly carried by legions of angels into the company of just men made perfect, I should still feel extremely nervous as to the correct way of treating the angels and the exact code of etiquette which prevails among just men after they have been perfected. (2) The other terror of course is that, if we are to survive, and if we know none of the details, then our future life may be much worse than the one which we are leaving. For the individual there is nothing specially cheerful in the doctrine of survival in the abstract. On the theory of non-survival we know the worst; on the theory of survival, combined with no sort of knowledge as to its details, the most horrible possibilities remain open to us; whilst, on some theories about the nature of the next life, these possibilities are extremely probable. Dr Johnson was afraid of death mainly because (quite reasonably, on his own theological view) he was afraid of hell. And I must insist that the fact that hell would be extremely unpleasant furnishes no ground for holding that it cannot be real. I must add that the doctrine of survival, accompanied by no theory as to its details or by a belief in hell, may add to other evils of life besides the fear of death. This is because of its connection with suicide. If I am persuaded that there is no survival I know that, when things in this life become too bad, I can leave them and cease to exist. But, on the theory of survival, I cannot kill myself, and I may only make my state worse if I kill my body. Now this frankly seems to me an appalling reflection; one may

never have the faintest desire to cease to exist, but the thought that one *could* not do so however hard one tried is suffocating, and makes the world into a prison, even when it is—as it is not for most people at most times—a palace too.

§ 7. Now, we will take what I have tried to show to be the most reasonable view, viz. that, if we survive at all, we are probably not much better or worse soon after death than soon before it. If this be true, the strangeness and our fear of it will remain; but it will no longer be the fear of a boy going to a public school of which he knows nothing, or of a man going under an operation of doubtful issue, but rather that of a nervous man going to take up his work in new surroundings when he has no reason to doubt that he will be tolerably happy and successful when the novelty has worn off. The possibility of ultimate downfall of course will remain too, and the possibility, though not the certainty, that the self is indestructible by its own acts, however badly things may turn out. On the other hand, anyone who agrees with the present writer in thinking that the three things in life really worth having are personal friendship, clear knowledge, and the contemplation of beautiful objects, will die, on this view, with a reasonable hope that he may be able to renew his friendships, increase and clarify his knowledge, and continue to contemplate beautiful objects. So far then it seems as if the only kind of survival in favour of which we can produce the least evidence would, for most of us personally, be likely to be better than extinction.

§ 8. But a serious qualification remains to be mentioned. If a life something like our present one is to go on indefinitely, will it not become at length an intolerable bore? If, on the other hand, it eventually ceases, is the consolation of surviving the first death worth anything to the individual? Again, to repeat a very pertinent question of Mr Bradley's, does not death sometimes bury difficulties about personal relations which might be disastrously exhumed by resurrection? Let us take the first two questions together. To a person possessed of intellectual curiosity and reasonable powers of exercising it, it does not seem to me that this life becomes burdensome except through ill health (including pain and exhaustion), loss of friends, or loss of a certain minimum of the means of physical comfort and decency. So long as there is anything in the world to master intellectually and understand more clearly, and a reasonable prospect of making progress in these directions, I can hardly imagine myself being permanently bored. Still less can I imagine this happening if there were old friends to

meet and new people whose thoughts and tastes I could discover by an adventurous process of drawing them out. When I contemplate a continuance of the present life and find the prospect boring, it seems to me that it is really old age with its loneliness, its ill health, its failing powers, and its headstrong dogmatism and onesidedness that I am dreading. If the main effect of death be to shake off these accumulated clogs from my mind, but otherwise to leave me neither much better nor much worse than it finds me, I do not think the danger of being bored a serious one; for there is not the slightest fear that I shall ever understand all there is to know, and yet there would be a reasonable prospect that I should continually understand more things and see more clearly their mutual relations. Still, I can see that it is *only* love and knowledge which "in heaven shall shine more bright," and I can imagine that those whose main interests are elsewhere might be bored with their immortality.

It is, of course, quite possible that, if we survive the first death and be not greatly changed, we may do this only to meet later with a second and final death. If this were true, it need not make the first survival worthless. We have seen that there is nothing very terrible in being dead if we do not survive, and that, apart from a natural fear of the circumstance of dying, the main ground for regret on this view is to die with our work unaccomplished, Now, if we survive one death, there is at least a hope that we shall have done all that is in us by the time we reach the second and final death. And there is no such hope if earthly death be the end of all of us. Finally, I do not see why, if we survive at all and are not greatly changed by our earthly death, death should not be a recurrent incident in our total life as sleep is in our present life. This would at least remove all fear of boredom; for each death would be a great adventure, and, as our knowledge increased, the fear of dying, which is so painful in this life, might not sadden our future lives. In them death might seem as normal and beneficent as sleep.

§ 9. Mr Bradley's question can best be discussed in the next section. We may sum up the results thus far as follows. For the individual the fear of dying is a reasonable one, and is independent of any theory about survival. Being dead is not to be feared if we are sure that we shall not survive; and dying is only to be regretted, on this view, if we still have reasonable prospects of happiness, knowledge, and friendship when we die.

On any view of survival, death is to be dreaded from its

strangeness, whilst a bare belief in survival and certain positive beliefs about the future life open up horrible possibilities or probabilities which a belief in extinction eliminates. Those who believe in extinction have the great consolation of having real suicide open to them; to the believer in survival, suicide may be an abstract possibility, but he does not know how to accomplish it, or whether it can be accomplished at all. A belief in survival, combined with the view that we are not greatly changed for the better or worse by death, offers a reasonable prospect of friendship and growing understanding to men; it need not be worthless to them if they be ultimately mortal, nor boring if they be ultimately immortal.

§ 10. We now pass to the second point of view from which death is to be considered, viz. our sorrow at the death of our friends. We have to analyse this sentiment, and to see how far a belief in survival is likely to have a consolatory influence on those who hold it. My sorrow at the death of anyone else is a complicated state of mind, like my fear of my own death; it consists of several emotions directed at different objects. There are at least three different sentiments involved in sorrow at the death of a friend. Suppose, *e.g.*, the friend is a promising youth who has been cut off in the war at the best time of his life. Then I feel sorry (*a*) for him, (*b*) for myself in losing him, (*c*) in a more abstract and general way for the loss to humanity of a person with his gifts and graces. These three states of mind are clearly distinguishable: I can feel (*a*) and (*c*) about a man whom I have never met, though I cannot feel (*b*); a religious man who had a lively faith that his friend was better off in the next world than he could ever be in this might feel (*b*) and (*c*) without (*a*); whilst, in the perfectly possible case of losing a friend without being under any illusion that he had great powers or virtues, I could feel (*a*) and (*b*) though not (*c*). Let us, then, consider these sentiments in turn and ask how they should be affected by a belief in survival.

§ 11. (*a*) In what sense can I reasonably be sorry for my dead friend if I believe that he has totally ceased to exist? He cannot be regretting that his life was cut short before his work was done or his pleasure enjoyed, for he neither knows nor regrets anything. My regret can only rationally take the impersonal form (*c*) on this hypothesis. The only more personal form that it can take is sympathy with *his* feeling of regret at leaving this life, on the assumption that he was conscious near the end and had this feeling. My sorrow in this case will be, not for him as dead, but for him as dying and dying unwillingly. Hence the belief in extinction renders

sorrow for the dead as individuals irrational, and, in doing this, it must be regarded as consolatory so far as it goes.

If, on the other hand, we believe in survival, sorrow for the dead will be reasonable or unreasonable entirely as we think their future state likely to be good or bad. If we think that they are in hell or in purgatory, it is reasonable to be sorry for them. If we think that their state after death is not conspicuously different from their state some time before, it is not rational to be particularly sorry for them, since, on this hypothesis, it will probably be better than their state during their last illness. It will, indeed, be reasonable to sympathise with them on two counts, so far as we can judge. We may sympathise with them on the strangeness and unfamiliarity of their new condition, and on their initial loneliness; for, if it is painful for us to have lost communication with them, it is presumably painful to them to have lost communication with us.

The conclusion seems to be that, on no theory except one which makes it probable that our friends are in hell or purgatory, is it reasonable to feel very sorry for them in being dead. If they have not survived, they do not exist to be objects of our sorrow; and, if they have survived, they are probably not permanently worse off than when they were with us. Sympathy with them, rather than violent sorrow for them, seems to be our appropriate attitude towards our dead friends immediately after their death, on the present theory. We shall feel this sympathy most strongly when their death has been violent and sudden, because it seems reasonable to suppose that, under these circumstances, their initial sense of strangeness and loss will be greatest.

§ 12. (*b*) My sorrow at my own loss seems to me to be in fact, and quite reasonably, much the most important factor in my total sorrow at my friend's death. Friendship being the most important good in life (with the possible exception of abstract knowledge), the loss of a friend is the worst evil that can happen to us. Now, of course, if we believe that death really is the end, we have nothing to mitigate our sorrow. On the other hand, have we very much to mitigate it if we believe in survival? I think we can only say that survival makes it *possible* that we may renew our friendships; but, without a great deal more detailed knowledge as to the next life than we can reasonably expect to have, I doubt if it be probable. Consider how easily friends who are contemporaries may be totally separated on this earth by the circumstances of business or family ties; remember that, of a pair of friends,

one may die fifty years before the other; and I think that we must admit that, even on the hypothesis of survival, the renewal of friendship is a faint hope rather than a reasonable probability. The question really depends largely on two metaphysical ones to which I am not prepared to give answers: (i) What is the real significance of space and time in the universe? and (ii) Has human love any importance *sub specie æternitatis* compared with what it has *sub specie temporis*? I can only say that, whilst I am pretty sure that *order* in time and space is a fundamental characteristic, I am much less sure that the particular positions and distances in time and space which are so important in this life are of universal significance. About human love I can say even less; the love of persons of opposite sex seems to me to have probably only a local and temporary significance, its *main* function in nature is obvious enough, and this may be its *whole* function. Friendship, on the other hand, cannot be dealt with or explained in this short and easy way (which is possibly inadequate even for the love of opposite sexes), and it may be that it really is of some importance from the point of view of the universe. But I think we should be unwise to build any great hopes on these two possibilities; and, therefore, I must conclude that a belief in survival can only be regarded as a faint mitigation of our grief at the loss of a friend. It leaves a loophole for hope, and that is about all we can say.

§ 13. This seems the place to deal with Mr Bradley's question mentioned in a previous section and there deferred. Human love is singularly imperfect; it is capricious, impermanent, and at the mercy of misunderstandings due to the absurdly complex way in which human minds have to communicate with each other. If a friend dies at a time when one's relations with him are perfect, there is, I think, a very real sense in which one may say that his death was the crowning point of the friendship; that if he had lived it could not have been permanently maintained at that level; and that by his death the friendship has gained the finished perfection of a work of art which a *post mortem* renewal might destroy, as a bad sequel injures a good novel. There are many similar difficulties, some of which Mr Bradley considers in detail. I think we must admit that they show that, so far as we can see, survival would not be an unmitigated advantage even as regards our personal relations with our friends; like most other things in the world, its effects would be partly good and partly bad. We may, in fact, sum up by saying that, if survival does not renew our personal relations, it is no consolation to

our sorrow at the death of a friend, but it is not likely to cause the difficulties mentioned by Mr Bradley; if it does renew our personal relations, it is a consolation to our sorrow, but it may lead to other difficulties of which we shall be free if we die with our bodies or survive without meeting our old friends and enemies.

(*c*) The impersonal sorrow that we feel at the loss to humanity caused by the death of a man in the prime of life belongs clearly to the next section, where we have to deal with death from the point of view of the human race as a whole.

§ 14. It has been noticeable so far that the doctrine of extinction has few genuine terrors for the individual so long as he regards the interests simply of himself and of his personal friends. It has, indeed, as we have seen, some consolation to offer on both counts. And the doctrine of survival, though in certain forms it has been seen to be mildly consolatory to the individual in viewing his own fate and that of his friends, cannot be said to have proved very encouraging in the only form in which it seems in the least probable; whilst, in some other forms, it suggests detestable possibilities and probabilities. But, when we consider the fate of the human race as a whole, and take a less personal point of view, the scene, in my opinion, changes altogether.

It seems about as certain as anything not *à priori* can be that, apart from a miracle, the earth will in time become uninhabitable by men, and, at a later time, by any organised life. It is a matter of indifference whether this time be long or short for anyone who takes at all a wide outlook. If, then, men die when their bodies die, it is practically certain that, within a long but finite time, there will be no human spirits in the universe. Now, everything that we know as having the slightest value, either is a human spirit, or is the state of such a spirit, or contains as an essential element such a state. Hence, if ever there be no human spirits there will, as far as we know, be no objects of the slightest value in the universe. There will, of course, remain objects which *would* be elements in valuable things *if* they stood in cognitive and other relations to human spirits (*e.g.* the properties of the elliptic integrals will remain, and the cognition of these *would* be valuable *if* there were anyone to cognise them). But they *will* not be valuable by themselves, merely because they *would* be elements in valuable wholes if the other elements, which as a matter of fact will be missing, were present. If, then, no human being survives the death of his body, it is certain that all valuable objects which depend in any way for their value on relation

to a human mind will some day cease to exist. And, as we do not know that there are any other valuable objects in the universe, we must say that, so far as we know, there is a date after which the universe will contain nothing of the slightest value.

There may, of course, be other spirits in the universe which are not human, *e.g.* other finite spirits or God. If so, of course the universe may always contain valuable objects, and only a certain class of valuable objects will be lost by the extinction of the human race. And, of course, the values that depend on human beings might be trivial as compared with those which depend on other spirits. But all this is pure conjecture.

§ 15. Supposing it were a true conjecture, could it be said that our efforts are of any permanent importance? The value of ourselves and of our personal relations could be of no permanent importance in this view. But the beautiful objects which we produce and the truths which we discover might be contemplated by other spirits when we have ceased to exist, and might help them to the production of still more beautiful objects and to the discovery of still more complex truths. Our contemplation and our knowledge will die with us and its value will die with it, but it might be succeeded by their contemplation and knowledge of the objects which we had produced or discovered. We may say then that, if all human beings die with their bodies, their efforts are only of permanent value on the following supposition: (*a*) that there exist other spirits; (*b*) that these spirits are so related to us that what we produce and discover can be contemplated by them and can help them to further artistic production and intellectual achievement; and (*c*) that either they are immortal or are related to other spirits in the same way as we can be to them, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Even on this fairly complex hypothesis (for which, so far as I know, we have not the faintest evidence), all values which reside in human characters, which are stored up in human institutions, or which are constituted by the personal relations of human beings, will vanish with the human race. Nevertheless, I should consider the universe tolerably satisfactory if I thought that there was no survival, but that the hypothesis mentioned above was true. On such a theory it could not fairly be said that men were mere means to the welfare of other spirits, any more than you could say that Newton was a mere means to Laplace because the discoveries of the former were the starting-point of the latter's work. I do not think the human race could reasonably complain if it knew that it

and its efforts stood in the same relation to another race of spirits and their efforts as Newton and his work stand to Laplace and his. We should make our discoveries and have the pleasure of contemplating their beauty, with the knowledge that, when we and our contemplation had ceased, others could contemplate the same objects and profit by our labour. Such a situation is neither degrading nor depressing.

The upshot of the discussion seems to be that, if there be no survival, a great part of all that we know to be valuable *must* be lost on any hypothesis. On a certain rather complicated hypothesis about other spirits and our relations to them, for which we have no evidence whatever, something would be saved from the wreck, and it would be enough to enable us to pronounce the universe a tolerably decent institution. Of the three great goods, human love goes altogether; human knowledge and human æsthetic contemplation go, as such, but the efforts of the thinker and the artist are not lost. The hypothesis of human survival would save all those without the need of any very complex subsidiary hypotheses. But we shall do well not to expect too much of the universe :—

> "Therefore, since the world has still
> Much good, but much less good than ill,
> And while the sun and moon endure
> Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
> I'd face it as a wise man would,
> And train for ill and not for good."

C. D. BROAD.

University of St Andrews.