

What is it that Survives?

- Hornell Hart -

The Question of Identity is Crucial

IF I ask: 'Will I survive bodily death?' I find myself facing an even deeper question: 'Who or what is this "I"? How can it be identified?'

The 'I'-thinker is an inescapable reality

That one cannot deny the existence of one's own essential selfhood without thereby reasserting it has been pointed out in Chapter 14. My essential selfhood consists in whatever it is that is referred to by the subject of the verbs 'I observe', and 'I act'.

The 'I'-thinker observes and acts in dreams

Now this conscious observer-operator who is referred to by the pronoun 'I' is active not only in the outer world of the senses, but also in my imagination, my rememberings, and my dreams. It observes and acts in those exceedingly vivid and clear dreams in which I become aware that I am dreaming and still go on with the dream. It has been the observer-operator in certain telepathically shared dreams which I have experienced and recorded. I assume that a similar 'I'-thinker has observed and acted in the shared dreams which others have recorded.

Identity, and the 'I'-thinker's memories

One of the characteristics of all normal 'I'-thinkers is the sense of personal identity. Vital to this self-identification is the recognition of the chain of one's own memories as being one's own. 'My past' is essential to my own sense of identity. When a person loses his memory (as in amnesia) he has to ask: 'Who am I?'

Professor C. D. Broad, in his lecture in 1958 on 'Personal Identity and Survival', took the following position:

'The disembodied personality might remember experiences had by the deceased human being, just as a human being in his waking state at one time remembers experiences had by him in his earlier waking states. In that case, and in that alone, could we say that the personality of the deceased human being had survived the death of his body in the full sense in which one's waking personality is reinstated after each period of normal sleep.'

The 'I'-thinker's values are also part of his identity

My identity projects itself, not only into the past, but also into the future. 'My purposes, my plans, my goals, my values' are vital to my selfhood. If a young man goes to college or enters military service with one set of values and purposes (such as to marry a certain girl, to be a doctor, and to serve humanity) and then later comes back with wholly different purposes (such as to marry a different girl, to get rich fast and unscrupulously, and to enjoy the thrills of high-stake gambling) his former friends are apt to say: 'He is so changed that he is a different person!'

My body is part of my earth-life identity

When questions of identity arise in courts of law they practically always hinge on the identification of the physical body. Recognition of the face, the bodily appearance, the scars, the distinctive gestures and the like is often crucial. Identification of finger-prints is still more conclusive.

The After-life as an Embodied Existence

During earth-life, 'my memories', 'my values', and 'my purposes' are vitally related to 'my physical body'. Murphy pointed out in 1945: "The biological point of view makes it difficult to think of any aspect of awareness as continuing independently of the very substratum which has given it its place in nature" - namely, the physical body.' Flew asked in 1953: 'How can such objects as people survive physical dissolution? This is a massive difficulty...'

But need survival be disembodied?

Professor Broad pointed out:

'Of all the hundreds of millions of men in every age and clime who have believed ... in human survival, hardly any have believed in survival *without a body*... It seems to me rather futile for a modern philosopher to discuss the possibility of human survival on an assumption which would

have been unhesitatingly rejected by almost everyone, lay or learned, who ever claimed seriously to believe in it.'

The dream body is an objective reality

The question of having a body after death may well be approached by way of intermediate psychological and psychic phenomena. Take first those rare but unquestionable experiences in which a dreamer becomes fully aware that he is occupying a body which is visible, tangible, solid, and capable of voluntary movement.

One is aware that this is not one's physical body - *that* body is back in the bedroom, lying in the bed. Moreover, this dream-world body can rise into the air, untrammelled by gravity.

This dream body is the vehicle of consciousness. One seems to be located in it just as, in waking life, one is located in one's physical body. One's sense of personal identity is vivid. Memory is available. Values are keen.

Now take the case of the shared dream. In such an experience each of the participants has a dream body which seems real. Moreover, one dreamer may recognize the other participant as having much the same facial and bodily appearance as in physical life.

One has a body when 'out of the body'

The fact that various individuals have found themselves observing and acting - and at the same time have been observed as apparitions - at distances away from their physical bodies, has been brought out in Chapters 10 and 12. Evidence that such experiences have occurred in scores of cases was published in 1954 in my article on 'ESP Projection: Spontaneous Cases and the Experimental Method'. Details of experiences reported in forty-one such cases have been tabulated, in 1956, in 'Six Theories About Apparitions'.

In all these cases the person who experienced ESP projection was aware of having a body other than his physical one. Moreover, in all these cases this projected body was seen by those who perceived the apparition. The apparitional body was both a vehicle for observing and acting by the appearer and also an object observed by the outside percipient.

But were these apparitional bodies dependent on the appearers' physical bodies?

The anti-survivalist (if he accepted the above statements) would probably take the position that, since the physical body was still living in these cases, the seat of memory and of values and purposes was actually the physical brain. The present chapter is not the place to argue the question of survival - that has been done in previous chapters. What we are concerned with here is to get as reasonable an idea as we can of what is the nature of that which survives. But it is worth noting at this point that the extremely close parallelism between the characteristics of apparitions of the living and of the dead, together with the mediumistic evidence as to surviving purposive personalities, and Drayton Thomas's conclusions about the etheric bodies of his communicators, all fit into one rational picture.

If out-of-the-body experiences do represent the same basic kind of phenomenon as the experience of leaving one's physical body permanently, may we not gain some insight into the nature of that after-death adventure by looking at some non-evidential - and still respectably reported experiences?

Some Experiences of Caroline Larsen

Mrs. Caroline D. Larsen was the wife of Professor Alfred Larsen, who taught violin at Middlebury College, in

Vermont. He was sufficiently distinguished to be listed in *Who's Who in America*. In her own right, Mrs. Larsen had previously published a book of stories in the Danish language. In 1927 she brought out a book which she called *My Travels in the Spirit World*. In that book she told the following experiences.

Her first experience out of her body

One evening, in the autumn of 1918, she had retired rather early. The next thing she knew, she found herself standing on the floor, looking down at her own physical body lying in her bed. She recognized every line in her own familiar face, but saw it pale and still, as if in death. Then she looked around the room. Everything looked as natural as ever. There was the little table with books and trinkets on it; there was the bureau, the dresser, the big armchair, the smaller chairs, the green carpet on the floor, the red wall paper with its pattern of urns and flowers.

She glanced once more at the body which to all appearances seemed dead. Then she turned and walked to the bathroom. As she passed the stairway she heard the music coming up from below, where her husband was rehearsing a string quartet. She recognized with delight the lovely Adagio from Beethoven's Opus 127 Quartet. She then approached a large mirror hanging above the wash-bowl. Through force of habit she went through the motions, of turning on the electric light but found that her fingers did not move the switch. However, there was no need for illumination.

Looking into the mirror she became aware for the first time that she had undergone an astonishing transformation. Instead of seeing a middle-aged woman, she beheld the figure of a girl about eighteen years of age. She recognized the form and features of her own girlhood, but more beautiful. She raised her hand before her face, and closed and opened her fingers. They seemed airy and delicate. Yet she felt no lack of strength in them, and no change of sensation in moving them. She felt unbounded joy and enthusiasm.

She reflected: 'I will go down and present myself to my husband and to the other members of the quartet.' No sooner had she thought of this idea than she started to carry it out. Instead of having to operate her legs with conscious effort, as we do in the physical body, she found that she moved with the freedom of thought.

But she was ordered back

Just as she came to the little platform which divided the stairway into two flights she saw, standing before her, a woman's spirit in shining clothes with arm outstretched and with forefinger pointed upwards. There was a look of strong determination in the spirit's face, and she said sternly: 'Where are you going? Go back to your body!' Mrs. Larsen knew instinctively that from this command and authority there was no appeal. Reluctantly she turned, reascended the stairs, walked through the hall into her bedroom and up to her bed. Her physical body lay there as still and lifeless as when she left it. She viewed it with feelings of loathing and disappointment, but in another instant she had again rejoined her physical form.

How a disembodied spirit feels

On the basis of this and later experiences, Mrs. Larsen reported that a disembodied spirit appears, feels, thinks and acts very much as she did in her first experience 'out of the body'. She stated:

'The mind undergoes no transmutation except to take on the added facility of being capable of reading others' thoughts. One wakes in the astral as one left the material... Nor does memory suffer in the passing over. In the astral, I could remember every detail of my past material life. I was perfectly aware of my own identity. I knew exactly what had transpired up to the time when I assumed the astral.'

She continued:

'Some of the departed spirits are at once fully ... able to reflect on their conditions, just as I was able to reflect on mine. Other spirits suspect dimly that something strange has overtaken them but they refuse absolutely to accept the realization, and in order to shut it more completely out of their minds they deliberately continue their familiar activities of the world... The majority of spirits are in so confused a state of mind that they do not suspect at all the great change they have undergone...

Everywhere in my journeys I found these new citizens of Spirit Land thronging the streets of cities, passing in and out of houses, travelling on trains and voyaging on steamers. In fact, wherever mortals habitate there are to be found also denizens of the spirit world.'

The transition to the 'astral world' is not incomprehensible

The out-of-the-body experiences reported in evidential cases of ESP projection have fundamental likenesses to shared-dream experiences. The experiences of Caroline Larsen, while not adequately evidential, are basically similar. These, in turn, are essentially similar to experiences reported in mediumistic communications purportedly coming from the deceased.

The objection is frequently raised that dream experiences are not real in the sense that physically embodied experiences are. But 'reality' consists essentially in two sets of factors: (1) shareability of the experience with other observer-operators; and (2) logical consistency, predictability and usability. It will be seen that the 'astral world' can and does have these characteristics.

Does the Unconscious Mind Become Conscious in the After-life?

Testimony by Drayton Thomas's father

The ostensible communicators through Mrs. Leonard stated that the division of the mind into a conscious and a subconscious part, which is characteristic of all human minds during incarnate life, ceases with the death of the physical body. Drayton Thomas reported in 1928 that his father had said (through Mrs. Leonard):

'On our own sphere ... I seem to have but one memory. I have the ordinary memory of physical things that I had on earth, and this is merged into the subliminal memory which operates consciously here. When one passes over, one's subliminal memory operates consciously...

[Here] we do not recall memory, because it is present. All is upon the one page. Past is present in that sense with us. It is impossible to forget anything; not that we are always looking at the past, but it is there for us to read in our memory. It is there without any striving for it.'

While such statements are not evidential, the indicated conception of personality has three important corollaries:

(1) It helps to explain the difficulties in mediumistic communication

Professor Broad said, in his 1955 discussion of Mrs. Leonard's mediumship, that the ostensible communicators allege that something analogous to the division between the conscious and unconscious mind recurs whenever they take possession of the medium:

'Only that part which corresponds to the *conscious* part in us is in control of the medium's body. This remains in some kind of connection with the rest of the communicator's mind, but the connection is tenuous and liable to be interrupted so long as he is possessing the medium's body. The ostensible communicators say that, when in possession of the medium, they sometimes forget altogether about the part of their mind which is not in control of her body. They say that, even when this does not happen, it is harder for them to get in touch with the contents of this part of their minds than it is for us to avail ourselves of the contents of our own subconscious selves.'

(2) It meets the objection about senility

Professor Dodds, in 1934, raised the following as a major argument against belief in survival:

'I find it hard to believe that growing old is really a reversible process - that mental changes so far-reaching as those associated with old age can be undone even when the supposed originating cause is removed by death.'

But if the unconscious mind, with all the memories of the personality's whole earth life, becomes fully accessible to consciousness after the physical body dies, then old age becomes only an episode in that full history. During our earthly existence we are far more restricted to the narrow time-slice of the specious present. But life after death would seem to be much broader and richer in its grasp of the time dimension.

Upon reading a preliminary draft of this chapter, Professor Dodds jotted this question in the margin. 'Would this not result in chaos?' It seems clear that if a person lost the power to concentrate on a reasonably restricted time interval, his experiences might well be so inclusive as to be chaotic. But note the last sentences of the statement by Thomas's father: 'Not that we are always looking at the past, but it is there for us to read in our memory. It is there without striving for it.' Thomas then asked: 'You would not experience that memory as vividly as when the

event had just happened?' His father replied: 'I could do so if I wished, by an act of will.'

Compare this with the phenomenon discovered by Penfield, when he touched with an electrode certain points in the brain. The patient thereupon relived a certain past experience as though it were actually present. If a capacity to do this, more or less at will, were characteristic of the after-life, the conclusions of the present section would seem to follow.

(3) It suggests enriched experience

Many of the sceptics about survival have shown a disposition to reject the sometimes naive spiritualistic conception of life after death as being a mere continuation of life on earth, in much the same sort of four-dimensional world as on earth. But if we accept the hypothesis that, after the death of the body, the unconscious mind of the survivor is merged with the conscious part, so that the entire personality becomes fully accessible to the 'I'-thinker, a new scope of post-mortem experience becomes conceivable - even though we must admit our present incapacity to grasp it with any close approach to full clarity.

Suggested Conclusions about What Does Survive

A basic characteristic of the inescapable 'I'-thinker is the sense of personal identity, based on recognition of the chain of his own memories as being his own.

That the after-life (at least in its early stages) is an embodied existence, is the conclusion which emerges from the study of ESP projection and of apparitions, as related to shared dreams.

The full accessibility of subliminal memories to the 'I'-thinker, after death, helps explain difficulties in mediumistic communication, meets the objection about senility being irreversible, and suggests a new scope of post-mortem experience. We can begin to conceive of the wider life which becomes possible when consciousness transcends what, on earth, has been its time dimension.