

ARTICLES

William Brown

Born in 1881, eminent Harley Street specialist, Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy at Oxford University and keen inquirer into psychical research. Also; Psychotherapist to King's College Hospital, London; Hon. Consulting Psychologist and Lecturer on Medical Psychology, Bethlem Royal Hospital, London. In two letters to *The Times* (May 7, 14, 1932) he wrote appreciatively but guardedly of Rudi Schneider's powers and declared that they are worthy of the closest scientific investigation. In a lecture delivered during the jubilee celebrations of the SPR he reviewed the evidence collected and examined by the society and declared that it was "sufficient to make survival scientifically extremely probable."

Personality and Survival of Bodily Death

- William Brown-

AS REGARDS the possibility of personal survival of bodily death, the evidence of Psychical Research is clearly of scientific importance. All relevant facts should be considered and investigated with scientific precision. Any scientific statements should be based upon knowledge and not upon ignorance. Nevertheless, our belief in survival is but little influenced by the findings of Psychical Research. Evidence from that source falls far short of convincing proof. Alternative hypotheses are possible, and in the end the conclusion must remain within the realm of hypothesis, whereas the arguments in favour of survival which are really impressive are on a different footing, and have to do with a different level of our mind - the level that comprises the general scheme of values. We have already seen on more occasions than one that value-experiences are only indirectly the subject-matter of psychology, and yet are the most important parts of our mental life. Hence a theory of values is needed, which is to be not a merely psychological theory. Considerations of a psychological nature are relevant, but do not constitute the foundations of such a theory. The theory of values belongs primarily to metaphysics, not to psychology.

This question is intimately bound up with the theory of values. Is the life we live on this earth worth while? If we believe that it is, what are our reasons for such belief? We may find that the answer to this gives an answer to the further question: Are we likely to survive? We are likely to survive so far as we can continue a realization of values which we are in process of realizing here. This is probably the most decisive criterion. We cannot get certainty. Scientifically we do not get certainty. It has often been remarked that in psychical research we have frequently seemed to be on the verge of obtaining some conclusive evidence to settle the question in a positive way, and through carelessness in the reports of observers or through peculiar circumstances apparently accidental, this evidence has broken down, producing the impression that we are possibly not meant to know. Possibly it is good for us not to be scientifically certain about a future life, for reasons that will at once suggest themselves. One such reason is that if the future life is happier than this life there would be a greater temptation to leave this life when faced with specially difficult circumstances, and so to lose the discipline which this life has for character, and to miss some of the factors of character-training. If, as Keats said long ago, this world is "the vale of soul making," it is fairly clear that many of the difficulties which we would otherwise wish to avoid, and do attempt to avoid, are of real benefit to us.

Secondly, if we were scientifically sure of a future existence, we should lose whatever moral advantage attaches to uncertainty. The uncertainty is itself a testing circumstance for character. Different people re-act to that uncertainty in different ways. Some say: "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die." Others says: "We have this life, let us make the best of it and develop its possibilities to the utmost, help one another while we are here, sink our merely individual differences as far as possible, pursue the values we dearly see without enquiring too much about the more ultimate values of existence at present hidden from us." These are the two extremes. On the one hand we may find people giving up the pursuit of ideals, adopting an Epicurean attitude towards life, regarding the senses and direct physical pleasure as the most obvious and the most important things in this life, and living for them. On the other hand, we may find people recognizing the value of evolution, approving of the good, emphasizing it, and fighting for it without thought of anything beyond - following virtue for its own sake without thought of reward. Perseverance in that attitude of mind is itself a training of character, and most likely to develop to the utmost the potentialities of character. A conviction, grounded in scientific knowledge, that there is a future life, would not necessarily interfere with such training; but in the previously mentioned type of person it might encourage a different order of "goodness" - it might encourage such persons to look at spiritual things as means to an end instead of as ends in themselves. Probably, if men were certain of another life, the actual differences between individuals would remain much as they are now.

If we believe in super-personal values, which are, as it were, caught up in, or participated in by, the individual personality - if we believe that the individual achieves personality partly through submission, living for values, striving to purify his power of appreciation of those values, and partly through affirmation of them, we pass beyond individuality towards a more general outlook on life, a super-individual outlook, in that way lessening individuality but gaining rather than losing in personality. As the individual disciplines his mind to an appreciation of this hierarchy of values, he gains another attitude which is also a personal attitude, the attitude of religion, in which he faces reality not in its abstract aspects of truth, goodness, and beauty, but in its concrete character as the spirit or soul of the universe, which includes these values in itself, and realizes them in its own life. The individual in losing his individuality, gains it again as part of this all-conclusive spiritual unity. And if we take the individual personality as a very faint reflection of what we may believe the Universal Mind to be, we may feel that its development and realization is cut short in this life. However long we may live, fulfilment is denied us in every case, more in some cases than in others, and the adequate fulfilment from the point of view of the imperfect human mind can only be achieved by continued existence in later lives. This would appear to be a much more powerful argument for belief in a future existence.

Another argument for survival is that from the absolute value of love and affection. Many people who would claim to have no particular wish or desire for personal immortality, yet have a feeling that the ending of all friendships in this life would be so pronounced a violation of any principle of conservation of value as to be profoundly irrational. Most men think more of the immortality of those dear to them than of their own immortality. What appears much more of a waste than that of merely individual excellences and achievements, is that of the bonds of affection that spring up between individuals and raise them to a higher unity. It is, indeed, in such a higher unity in this life between individuals who are unselfishly fond of one another that we may see an analogy of what may be eventually the communion of saints or the system of souls towards which the whole universe may be working. We may regard the whole process of evolution as a process of soul-making. And without love, no soul.(1)

(1) Those who think that a *disbelief* in immortality is justified by science and philosophy are the dupes of their own cleverness or erudition. The advance of science has freed us from crude superstition and its savage terrors, but leaves us with the larger hope - the spacious hope, glorious is the adventure.

The process of evolution, occurring not only on this planet but within the whole of the stellar systems of the universe, may be a process of indefinite multiplication of psychical and spiritual reality, and an indefinite union and systematization of that reality. It may be that the whole process of existence is a process in which God or the Absolute goes out of Himself to produce individual agents, to a certain extent separated from one another, with a very small initial amount of freedom which they can make use of and develop, and so work out their own salvation by gradually adding to that freedom - realizing the conditions under which that freedom is diminished or increased, learning by experience that they cannot be sufficient unto themselves, that they must live as parts of one another, realizing that salvation can only come to all simultaneously, that we shall all be saved together if we are saved at all. Possibly the conditions of reality itself may be such that only in this way can souls be produced. We may *imagine* conditions in which souls might spring fully developed from the Godhead, and yet that may be impossible. It is a question of what we mean by the omnipotence of God. God is omnipotent in that He can do everything in harmony with His own nature. Some things are not in harmony with His nature. It may be that the production of individual souls in initial perfection and completely adapted to one another is not in harmony with His nature.

Such a view as this seems to be assuming the time process as something real. If we regard time as ultimately real, and God as in time rather than time in God, we come up against all the contradictions that Kant has set out so fully, and a general philosophy of existence is impossible to us. So far as we regard time as ultimately real we are certainly limited to a merely scientific knowledge of the world. That is what science is - organized knowledge in terms of space and/or time. But philosophy attempts to pass beyond this position. We may, if we like, protest that it is impossible to pass beyond; that we are in time, and cannot get out of time. I have already tried to explain how according to the doctrine of values we are on occasions lifted more or less out of time even in this temporal life. Nevertheless, the sketch which I have given of the production of souls out of the divine nature or essence, and their gradual return, is in terms of time. That is the way in which it appears to us, the only way in which we can think of it. We find that all our scientific thinking, all our scientific knowledge, while giving us an increasingly clear view of the world around us, ties us down to the self-contradictory framework of space and time. The limitation is especially apparent in the case of time.

Nevertheless, by timelessness one does not mean a *totum simul*, a mere simultaneity. Timelessness, or eternity, is not a negation of time, it is rather a fulfilment of time. Time for us, as we experience it, is more than spatialized time, more than a sequence of one thing after another. Bergson has drawn from this consideration a conclusion precisely opposite to that which I am drawing. Bergson makes time, *durée réelle*, the very stuff of reality. The time with which we deal in physics and in the other physical sciences is spatialized time. Bergson would consider that reality as such is duration, and so one finds at the centre of his system of philosophy the conception of an *élan vital* pressing forwards towards greater and greater vital complexity. This is the fundamental principle which he uses in explaining evolution, upon which may be grafted the Darwinian theory of struggle for existence and natural selection and other evolutionary factors of modern biology. The world is in process of creation, gild to the question about the beginning of it all, Bergson gives a most unsatisfactory reply. He speaks about an "interruption" occurring at an unspecified date in the past in the forward progress of the spiritual principle a falling away in the opposite direction, which is matter. In the organic world one finds this vital impulse making use of matter (its own "waste product," as it were). The vital impulse continues to mould it for its own purposes. Bergson's idea of the relation of structure and function is that function produces structure, and not structure function. His view is the opposite of the materialistic theory, according to which one starts with the simplest configuration of atoms that fall into groups or systems, the more stable systems surviving, until systems arise sufficiently complicated and stable to be capable of the function of consciousness. For Bergson the reality is spiritual energy, which asserts itself in spite of a tendency to "fall away." As there is a falling away, in a sort of condensation of the world in matter, the spiritual energy then proceeds to mould that matter and produces the various systems of function and plan, culminating in the intuitive and intellectual life of man. The objection to this theory is that it does not carry us far enough. The assumption which it has to make (viz., that of an "interruption") practically means a retreat from the philosophic problem. To the question "Why did the interruption occur," there is no answer. On the other hand, if one holds that God exists from eternity to eternity - that the existence of God and Spirit is beyond time, then one may find - or some genius in future ages may be able to find - a place for time within that eternal system, and one may be able to explain how the temporal series has arisen.

The individual mind is an abstraction, just as, if we look towards the future, we can see the various selves or personalities becoming more and more harmonious with one another and achieving universal values; so, if we think back into our past, and into the past of the whole organic world and of the stellar systems, we again find ourselves arising from unity rather than from diversity. We are parts of one another from the beginning, just as we become parts of one another in the end. We are parts of one another in the beginning in a different sense, indeed, from that in which we become parts of one another in the end; nevertheless, the beginning and the end, though separated for us by a temporal series, are parts of the same system. If we think at all we have to assume that reality is intelligible, which means that reality forms a system in which everything is relevant to everything else - we have to accept the principles of relevance and of sufficient reason.

Our thinking occurs in time, and we set out our scientific knowledge in a temporal sequence. Yet in our thinking we see that truth transcends time. The universe, the totality of things, must be a system, but it must be beyond time, a system that finds a place for time in itself. What is the meaning of time to us individually? It has various meanings. Taken at its highest level time has the meaning of development, of a deeper and deeper penetration into the meaning of things. Time means for us deepened insight into the significance of the universe. Some may hold that "the end is progress." These have the zeal of the reformer, who wishes to leave the world better than he found it. But thought cannot stop there. Indefinite progress is intellectually almost as bad as indefinite regress. There is no meaning in a better unless one can believe in a best. This world is imperfect, and the more we appreciate these imperfections the more we tend to realize the significance of progress, and of a possible perfection. When we hear of a terrible case of cruelty, or of cynical self-seeking, it is then that we become specially conscious of what good means in contrast with evil, just as it is through our own bad actions, through our own mistakes, that we become more aware of what we are falling away from, of the possibilities which we are missing in the way of development of character. And all this comes to us in sequence of time. It can only come to us in that form in our individual lives, and the time sequence is an essential condition of this life. Similarly with the appreciation of beauty, we can only wake our souls in process of time; we need time for it. Likewise with truth; we can only fully appreciate truth through the process of manufacturing it, hammering it out. But some do it much more rapidly and completely than others. A mathematical genius will reach mathematical truth at a much quicker rate than will a mathematician of average ability. Mathematics, indeed, is a good illustration of the significance of temporal experience in revealing what is essentially self-evident and beyond time. The time taken in reaching truth is relative to mathematical "sincerity," to the extent to which the mathematician can free himself from the influence of irrelevant factors. So in morals, we in our finite lives can only achieve the self-evident through painful experience and frequent failure. Sincerity is an indispensable condition. We thus gradually remake ourselves in the light of the moral ideal, and in so doing gain an ever-increasing insight into the nature and significance of that ideal. Similarly with art - aesthetic appreciation of music, painting, sculpture, etc. So, too, in religion, which is an attempt to find out the purpose of the universe, believing that there is such a purpose, taking it as a hypothesis, and endeavouring to identify oneself as far as possible with that purpose, and to play one's part within it. Here there is the great difficulty of optimism and pessimism. The purpose of the universe may be not beneficent, but maleficent, or again it may be a huge mistake, it may have no meaning at all, and what we think is its meaning may be simply illusion due to our own individual and restricted point of view. The argument against this is a pragmatic one, that the more sincere we are with ourselves in working out and applying the doctrine of values, the more do we realize that there is a force greater than ourselves, not only individually but also collectively, working towards a realization of these values. We advance inevitably from a religion of humanity to a religion of God.

Note: The above article appeared in "Mind and Personality" by William Brown (1926, University of London Press, London).

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