The Survival Question: Impasse or Crux?¹

EMILY WILLIAMS COOK

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the present status of research on the question of survival of human personality after death. Parapsychologists have adopted several strategies for dealing with the current impasse between the two major hypotheses, but the approach that remains to be tried is to implement the many lines of investigation that have been suggested by previous research. It is concluded that only serious testing of the rival hypotheses with renewed research will determine whether survival research is at an impasse or at a crux that will eventually lead to new knowledge.

One of the major topics of interest to members of the (British) SPR and the ASPR, both before and after the formation of the societies in the 1880s, was the question of survival of individual personality after death, which for many in the mid-nineteenth century seemed approachable by science through what Henry Sidgwick called the "mass of obscure phenomena commonly known as Spiritualistic" (1882, p. 7). Perhaps surprisingly, neither the statements of intent nor the first presidential addresses of the two societies include any direct mention of the issue of survival; and the committee of the British SPR assigned to investigate the phenomena of Spiritualism was called simply the "Committee on Physical Phenomena." Nevertheless, the general motivation for engaging in the kind of research undertaken by members of the societies was the desire to understand the nature of human personality in a world increasingly dominated by materialistic, mechanistic philosophies; and there is no doubt that many of the early psychical researchers intended specifically to examine Spiritualism's basic premise "that human beings survive bodily death, and that occasionally, under conditions not yet fully understood, we can communicate with those who have gone before" (Hill, 1919, p. 25). Similarly, the question of survival was evident in two other topics of interest to the societies: reports of apparitions occurring at the moment of death or later and reports of unusual events in houses reputedly haunted.

Now, more than 100 years after the official founding of psychical re-

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search, it seems an appropriate time to ask how far we have progressed toward an answer to the survival question and where we now stand with regard to continued research on the question. I think there are few, if any, parapsychologists today who would be willing to argue that we have an answer to it, whether an answer of "yes," an answer of "no,"
or some more complicated answer. To say that we have an answer would be tantamount to saying that we have a basic understanding of human personality and its ontological status; and I can only agree completely with Gardner Murphy when he said that there is "a little boldness or even... arrogance in the demand of humanity that we should get immediate answers to questions like these" (Murphy, 1957, p. 134) and that we will learn much more "by emphasizing constantly how little we know" (Murphy, 1957, p. 135). Accordingly, I do not intend to review here the past achievements of survival-related research. (For reviews of this evidence, see Gauld, 1977, 1982; Roll, 1982; Stevenson, 1977). Despite these achievements, the survival question has gone from being an unstated premise of psychical research, and then one of its major issues, to becoming what it appears to be today: only a perfunctorily tolerated stepchild (or, perhaps more accurately described, a neglected grandparent) of parapsychology. I would like to suggest here that it may be time to reexamine our assumptions and our present position with regard to the survival question and to renew our efforts to address the question, perhaps along many of the lines laid out by our predecessors.

During the past 100 years, survival research has made two major accomplishments. In the first place, the persistence of researchers interested in the survival question has led us to a point where we now have many different kinds of evidence that can be said to pertain to the question of survival. In the area of mediumship, for example, psychical researchers, partly because of dissatisfaction with the too-often fraudulent aspects of physical mediumship, encouraged and developed the study of mental mediumship. From this there emerged an impressive amount of evidence that mediums could occasionally give information about a deceased person of which they had no normal knowledge. Primarily during the first few decades of psychical research, sustained research, particularly with several exceptional mediums, and innovative techniques to examine alternate hypotheses produced more complex phenomena, such as the book tests and newspaper tests, absent or otherwise sensorially isolated sitters, drop-in communicators, living and fictitious communicators, and the library puzzle cases and cross-correspondences. Furthermore, interested in cases of apparitions that might also provide evidence of some paranormal process, psychical researchers investigated and reported numerous cases of crisis apparitions (usually of the dying), apparitions of the deceased showing purpose or conveying information unknown to the percipient, apparitions of the living, hauntings, and poltergeist cases, both with and without identifiable deceased agents. Similarly, investigation over the past 100 years has turned up vast numbers of out-of-body experiences, near-
death experiences, deathbed visions, and cases of ostensible reincarnation and possession. No one can deny that, in terms of the quantity of data produced, the yield of survival-related research has been considerable.

Unfortunately, some of this evidence so far seems to have done more to obscure the question than to clarify it. The only question about survival amenable to empirical research is still the original one: whether there is evidence to support the idea that a person, at some point in time after the death of his or her physical body, can produce in some manner behavior observable by still-living persons. Thus, the only phenomena directly relevant to the question of survival are those that ostensibly involve a deceased person. Saltmarsh similarly defined survival evidence by saying that for phenomena to be considered "evidence of survival they must possess some characteristic which will connect them with some deceased person" (1932a, p. 106). By this definition, phenomena such as OBEs, NDEs, apparitions of the living and the dying, and poltergeist cases with no identifiable deceased agent cannot be considered direct evidence either for or against the hypothesis that survival of death is possible. They are important indirect evidence, in the same way that all the phenomena of parapsychology, bearing as they do on the relationship of the mind and body, may be considered indirect evidence; and they may contribute importantly to survival research when examined, in both empirical and theoretical work, along with direct evidence. Nevertheless, the failure to distinguish clearly between the direct and the indirect evidence may lead to confusion when it comes to evaluating survival research.

The other major accomplishment of research on the survival question, in my view, is in terms of the quality of the evidence. The early psychical researchers were well aware of many normal explanations for the phenomena they studied, and they instituted such methodological procedures as concealing the identity of sitters from mediums, physically isolating sitters from mediums, making complete and often verbatim records of the sittings, and even (on occasion) controlling the personal life of the medium or hiring private detectives to watch him or her. They also, as perhaps too few people are aware, initiated the modern psychological studies of eyewitness testimony (Hodgson & Davey, 1887). Their efforts brought us to a point where many persons who have examined the available direct evidence would agree that we do not yet have a satisfactory normal explanation for the best of that evidence. Explanations such as chance, fraud, unreliable testimony, sensory cues, "fishing," or suggestion are and always will be possible in individual cases, but they are no longer reasonable as comprehensive explanatory hypotheses. This seems to me no mean achievement, and it may even be considered a partial fulfillment of Henry Sidgwick's stated goal to resolve "the dispute as to the reality of these phenomena" (1882, p. 8).

Again, however, there is a negative side to this achievement, in that so far we have no satisfactory paranormal explanation either. The paranormal interpretations of the various phenomena all take one of two major forms:
The phenomena are said to include some input from a surviving deceased personality (the survival hypothesis), or the phenomena are said to derive entirely from paranormal capacities of the living (the super-psi hypothesis). Unfortunately, neither hypothesis has yet been formulated in such a way that a particular interpretation of specific data is potentially falsifiable. Any abilities attributed to a deceased communicator are theoretically attributable to a living one; but conversely it is equally true that any abilities attributed to a living mind can theoretically be granted to a deceased one. Thus, any data can, in principle, fit either hypothesis, and it is difficult at this point to see any clear reason to favor one hypothesis over the other, even when one considers the issue of parsimony.

For example, interpretations of apparitions have frequently pivoted around the cases of collective percpience. Because in many cases more than one person has simultaneously seen the same apparition, some researchers have concluded that the apparition was in some sense objective and hence attributable to outside agency, such as the deceased person. On the other hand, in many other cases some people potentially in a position to see the apparition have not seen it, and this seems to support the interpretation that the apparition was subjective and thus attributable to the personal agency of the percipients, such as their telepathic and hallucinatory capacities. Our ability to judge the two hypotheses is further hampered if we heed the warning of investigators such as Salter and Broad (in correspondence cited in Hart & Collaborators, 1956, p. 203) that we do not have enough information in most collective cases to decide if or to what extent they were truly collective.

Another important example occurs in connection with interpretations of cases of mediumship. Diverse lines of evidence, including observations of fictitious and living communicators (such as Bessie Beals2 [Tanner, 1910], the chauffeur Réalîer [Hyslop, 1919], or Philip [Owen, with Sparrow, 1976]) and the word association tests by Carington (Carington, 1934; Thouless, 1937), underlined the notion that communicators were who they said they were. From this point, some persons emphasized the extreme complexity of many cases, including specificity of detail, evidence of purpose on the part of a deceased person, or accurate characterization, and tried to find a comprehensive theory that would reconcile these features with the inaccurate, fictitious, or trivial elements. Some, such as Mrs. Sidgwick (Sidgwick, Mrs. H., 1900), therefore suggested that a deceased person influenced the medium’s mind (often via the sitter’s mind) in varying degrees. On the other hand, others, such as Dodds (1934), emphasized the cases involving living communicators and the imperfections in the available evidence and decided that the paranormal abilities of living persons could account adequately for the evidence.

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2 According to Nicol (1973), Bessie Beals may in fact have been a real, and not a fictitious, communicator, despite G. Stanley Hall’s public assertions that he had invented her.
A similarly unresolvable situation seems to exist in connection with cases of the reincarnation type. Some persons may emphasize that the child's cognitive knowledge, behavior, skills, and physical characteristics cluster around one specific deceased person, and thus may conclude that the child has somehow been influenced by or may even in some sense be a surviving deceased person. Others may draw attention to the apparently fictitious previous personalities of some unsolved cases, the living previous personalities in cases in which the subject was born before the previous personality died, the child's errors, and the preponderance of cases where belief in reincarnation is strong; they may conclude that any paranormal features of the cases can be explained by the child's own psi.

For many decades now, this dichotomy of interpretations has seemed to most observers to be an unbreakable impasse. As Alan Gauld summarized the situation some 25 years ago, "the rival arguments have reached a deadlock so absolute that it seems as though no reinterpretation of the materials can evade it, nor any factual discoveries resolve it" (Gauld, 1961, p. 226). There have been several kinds of responses by parapsychologists to this frustrating situation, some of them indicating a belief that the survival question should be dropped, others maintaining instead that the question should be pursued.

The literature of parapsychology during its second 50 years has suggested that the response of the majority of researchers has been that research on the survival question led us to the point of impasse, and so it is fruitless to persist in such research. The more moderate approach is the one associated with J. B. Rhine, who said that "since logically no known test design can yield acceptably conclusive evidence," survival research "should be indefinitely shelved until, if possible, an effective approach can be devised" (1975, p. 43). According to this view, until an effective new method turns up, time and money can be better spent on studying the nature, function, and characteristics of psi in living persons, because an improved understanding of psi processes may lay the groundwork for the development of a new approach to the survival question. Furthermore, evidence that living minds are not constrained by physical or temporal boundaries may strengthen the hypothesis that minds of the deceased are likewise not constrained (Rhine, 1949).

A more extreme response is the one that suggests that the question should be abandoned entirely by parapsychologists because it is by nature not solvable by scientific methods. Those who hold this view would suggest that the question be returned to the realms from whence it came: philosophy and religion. For such persons, and perhaps for others as well, the association of survival research with religion and specifically with Spiritualism makes the topic something of an embarrassment to the field or, at best, an interesting historical phenomenon.

A recent variant of the suggestion that survival research be abandoned would seem to be the product of the modern utilitarian attitude toward knowledge that demands applications. Hövelmann, for example, has
asked "whether investigating the survival question is important and desirable at all... Would this knowledge be useful...?" (1983, p. 138). The same argument has repeatedly been aimed at parapsychology in general, but fortunately most parapsychologists seem still to be scientists in the original sense of the word "science," which means "knowledge" and is not a synonymous term for "engineering."

The second kind of response to the current impasse in survival research is that we should continue with the research; but a look at survival research strategies of recent decades indicates that even here most parapsychologists have favored an indirect rather than an empirically direct approach to the problem. Thus, important research on phenomena indirectly related to the survival question, such as OBEs, NDEs, and poltergeists, has been and continues to be done; but research directly related to the survival question, such as on mediumship, apparitions, hauntings, or poltergeist cases with identifiable deceased agents, has, with scattered exceptions, been almost completely abandoned.

There has also been a trend toward concentrating on the theoretical or philosophical aspects of the problem. Because the empirical approach of the first 50 years of psychical research had created the impasse, it seemed reasonable to suppose that the next phase of effort ought to be an attempt to unravel the situation theoretically. A sizeable proportion of publications related to the survival question from the 1930s on has consisted of theoretical, methodological, or philosophical contributions. In some, the intent was not to present new data but to present old data in a new light. Thus, for example, the important work of Tyrrell (1953) and of Hart (Hart & Collaborators, 1956; Hart & Hart, 1933) on apparitions consisted of analyses and reinterpretations of previously published cases. In other papers, such as that of Price (1953), the intent was not to examine the data at all, but to examine the intelligibility of the concept of survival.

Conceptual activities are necessary and important parts of research on any problem, but a preponderance of philosophical papers on the survival problem could reinforce suspicions that survival is a topic suitable only for philosophy. Fortunately, therefore, a few people have continued empirical research on the survival question. The most noteworthy research efforts have been attempts to break down the impasse with a new approach to the problem. Some research has been aimed at identifying and studying new types of evidence that the super-psi hypothesis might not readily accommodate. Examples of this include studies of drop-in communicators (e.g., Gauld, 1971; Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1975), cases of the reincarnation type (e.g., Stevenson, 1974), and investigations of responsive xenoglossy (e.g., Stevenson, 1984). In other research, new methods have been tried on familiar types of data. For example, Schmeidler and her associates (Maher & Schmeidler, 1975; Moss & Schmeidler, 1968; Schmeidler, 1966) applied quantitative methods to the investigation of three reputedly haunted houses in an effort to learn whether perceptions by outsiders about the "ghost" would match those of the family living in the house. Osis and
Haraldsson (1977) studied reports of deathbed visions by making predictions based on two rival hypotheses about the cases and then evaluating how well the cases fit the predictions of each model.

In general, however, most empirical research on the survival question for many years has been sporadic and unsustained. The extent to which this is true can perhaps be appreciated by noting the numbers and types of papers dealing primarily with the survival question that have been published in this Journal during the past 25 years. Out of a total of almost 450 papers, about 70 dealt mainly with the survival question. More than 40 of these were of a primarily theoretical, philosophical, or methodological nature. Sixteen papers were reports of isolated cases, six were surveys (with five of these being surveys of rebirth cases), and only six papers reported attempts at experiments in the context of field work to investigate data relevant to the survival question.

It may be an oversimplification, but I do not think it is a misleading one, to say that in general much of the first 50 years of survival research was spent gathering data and much of the second 50 years was spent evaluating and theorizing about that data. As in any field, however, data-gathering and hypothesizing must proceed together in a sustained effort to formulate specific hypotheses about the evidence, to make specific predictions based on those hypotheses, and to collect new data against which to test the predictions and evaluate the hypotheses. Such research need not wait for some radically new or conclusive test of the survival hypothesis to be developed; such a test is not likely to be developed, in fact, without ongoing research. As Thouless (1969) said about parapsychology in general, “our task now is [not] to think out a new paradigm” but to conduct “more detailed and more precise research” (p. 290) organized by hypotheses that are to be tried out on old and new data. Unfortunately, as Schmeidler has pointed out, “Little of the research on survival has so far been of the hypothesis-testing type” (1965, p. 157); it has instead examined theories (such as the very claims that there is or is not survival) that are too broad now for testable predictions.

Furthermore, I wish to emphasize that the hypotheses must be tested on new (as well as old) data. If the old data brought us as far as the present impasse, they alone are not likely to lead us out of it. Also, new insights are more likely to come from direct contact with new materials and cases, and not from exposure only to evidence that has been filtered through published reports, no matter how careful and complete those reports may have been.

There have in recent years been many excellent and reasonable suggestions for research, most of them derived from previous lines of research,

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3 Of these six papers, three involved reputedly haunted houses (Maher & Schmeidler, 1975; Moss & Schmeidler, 1968; Schmeidler, 1966), and three involved experiments with mediums (Haraldsson, Pratt, & Kristjansson, 1978; Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1974; Osio, 1966).
and all of them belying the assumption that survival research has led only to a dead end from which no testable hypotheses can be derived. Regrettably, none of them have been adequately pursued, if pursued at all. The most promising means of attacking the present super-psi/survival impasse may be by making specific predictions in connection with one or the other hypothesis and then comparing cases involving living persons and cases involving deceased persons to see whether any differences between the two groups would emerge. Hart (Hart & Collaborators, 1956), for example, compared collective apparitions with a few cases of shared (and presumably telepathic) dreams. He pointed out that, according to an ESP hypothesis, one would expect discrepancies in the reports of the various percipients or dreamers, because both experiments and spontaneous cases show that ESP is often unreliable and incomplete. Uniformity in independent reports, on the other hand, would suggest the operation of something that is in some sense more objective. The reports of shared dreams that he cited did differ in varying degrees from one dreamer to another; but the reports of collective cases seem not to differ in the main details about the apparition’s appearance and activity. Systematic research to follow up Hart’s observation would surely yield useful results, whether it were to confirm or discredit his hypothesis.

Similarly, Stevenson (1972) and Gauld and Cornell (1979) have suggested that we examine poltergeist cases in light of the hypothesis that some cases may derive from a living agent whereas others may derive from a deceased one. They have suggested some possible criteria for distinguishing the one type of case from the other, and examination of cases along the lines they have suggested may well turn up other, unsuspected differences (or similarities) among the cases.

Saltmarsh (1932b) proposed a test in which photographs of people known to a deceased person would be sealed in envelopes, and some would then be randomly chosen and presented (still sealed) by proxy to a medium. It seemed virtually impossible to Saltmarsh that the medium could simultaneously perceive the photograph clairvoyantly, recognize the photograph telepathically, and then gather verifiable information about the deceased person in the photograph by telepathy or clairvoyance; but I have no doubt that this would not for long disconcert a super-psi proponent. Saltmarsh’s proposal might therefore be more useful if expanded to compare cases such as he described (involving a deceased person) with information given by the medium when the photographs were of people known to a designated living person or even of complete strangers. Similarities or differences in the amount and quality of information given by the medium in the two situations might strengthen one or the other hypothesis.

It is important to emphasize that the testing of hypotheses must include specific testing of the super-psi hypothesis. We need to examine systematically the idea that psi in the living can account for survival-related evidence to see how far and how well this hypothesis holds up. For example, Gauld (1982) has suggested that we make efforts to obtain mediumistic
communications from living persons, because data of this sort so far are meager. Comparisons of living and deceased communicators would be of immense value in assessing the super-psi hypothesis. We might also renew the efforts of Myers (1903) and others to study the relationship between mediumship, multiple personality, and possession with the particular goal of obtaining paranormally derived information in the context of cases of multiple personality and then comparing this information with information obtained from mediums. Alvarado and Martínez-Taboas (1983) have also suggested several lines of research to test the super-psi hypothesis, including expansion of the experimental research on task complexity. For example, they suggest experiments in which a subject must integrate information from several agents or from several targets in separate locations.

Another suggestion for attacking the super-psi/survival impasse may be found in Murphy's (1945) hypothetical case, analogous in some respects to the cross-correspondences, in which persons who had not known each other in life would meet after death, learn that they had had something in common during life (such as collecting old Wedgwood china), and then communicate that information through a medium. The intent would be to look for information that had never been known to any living person (but was nonetheless verifiable) and that therefore provided evidence of the purposeful interaction of several deceased persons. Lydia Allison (1945) attempted once to implement this suggestion in a sitting with Mrs. Leonard. When the purpose and procedure for the experiment were explained to her, no less a source than Feda, Mrs. Leonard's control, said: "As a matter of fact, my dear, I doubt if there's such a thing as an absolutely safe test that could not be explained by telepathy" (Allison, 1945, p. 212); but in the spirit of a true scientist, she said she would try. The results were, strictly speaking, a failure. Feda claimed to have learned that Hyslop, Verrall, and Myers had all played a game on a board with little squares during a certain period of years. Although this was to some extent verified, it is also true that nearly everyone of their social class in Britain or America at that time would have played chess or checkers. Also, the test was invalidated by the existence of living people who had known all three of the deceased people (and thus could theoretically have been the source for the information). This example did, nevertheless, indicate the feasibility of the test and the willingness of the medium's control to cooperate. It was perhaps unreasonable to expect total success on the first attempt, and it seems unfortunate that, to my knowledge, the test was never tried again.

Some parapsychologists have also suggested that we introduce prospective studies into survival research. In 1891 Myers prepared a sealed package that contained a message that he intended to communicate after his death. The result was inconclusive, at best (Salter, 1958). Although the general idea was useful, the specific method used was inadequate, primarily because the package, once opened, could not be reused for another attempt. Therefore, as most parapsychologists are aware, Thouless
(1948) and Stevenson (1968) have suggested much improved variations on this test, in which a person who has encoded a message by a cipher or set a combination lock will attempt, if possible, to communicate after death the information needed to decipher the message or open the lock. Because these tests are relatively simple (nearly anyone can participate at a minimum of cost and effort), and because even just one success would be of great interest and importance, recent efforts to recruit more participants should be encouraged (Berger, 1983).

Schmeidler (1977) has proposed another kind of prospective study. For this research, volunteer subjects would be evaluated by interviews and by psychological tests or questionnaires to learn whether and how the person might try to communicate after death and to identify specific personal characteristics or memories that might figure in that communication. Observations and studies, particularly with mediums, made after the person's death would then be compared with the premortem predictions to see if the results support the hypothesis that personal characteristics and purposes continue in some way after death.

Despite the overwhelming emphasis by parapsychologists in recent decades on experimental and theoretical work, the study of spontaneous cases also still has much to contribute to parapsychology in general and to survival research in particular. In the first place, the ongoing identification and investigation of many new spontaneous cases is necessary if we are to examine, compare, and systematically evaluate the various hypotheses proposed to account for them. In the second place, it is still true that a strong, well-documented, and well-investigated spontaneous case could go a long way toward establishing the reality (if not yet the correct explanation or interpretation) of a particular phenomenon. Unfortunately, another of parapsychology's under-utilized resources is its model for the investigation of spontaneous cases (e.g., Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886).

Stevenson (1973) has outlined a hypothetical "perfect" case of the reincarnation type, in which a child displays an impressive combination of memories, physical characteristics, and behavior and skills associated with a deceased person and in which an investigator has made a written record of all these features before any verification of them was undertaken. Similar outlines of "perfect" cases could be drawn up for other phenomena, and keeping these hypothetical cases in mind could help us improve our methods both of searching for and then investigating new spontaneous cases. The goal ought to be not simply to find more spontaneous cases, but to find better-evidenced cases coming closer to our hypothetical "perfect" models, and also to find cases particularly suggestive of survival, such as cases of verifiable drop-in communicators (e.g., Gauld, 1971; Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1975) or cases of responsive xenoglossy (e.g., Stevenson, 1984). Increased and improved vigilance in the matter of spontaneous cases may also help to obviate criticisms of many earlier cases by decreasing the time between the occurrence and the investigation
of a case and by increasing the number of cases in which a written record of an experience, made prior to its verification, has been preserved.

New surveys of spontaneous cases directly related to the survival question, based on older surveys such as the SPR’s Census of Hallucinations (Sidgwick et al., 1894), may also contribute further to survival research by providing new data. One often hears the complaint (with its implied criticism of the earlier research) that, for example, crisis apparitions seem no longer to occur. Most surveys of recent decades have been inadequate either to uphold or refute this criticism. In the first place, these surveys have not included any investigation of reported experiences, and so they can really only be said to have indicated what people believe has happened to them, not what may actually have happened. In the second place, most modern surveys have been conducted with mailed questionnaires, not by face-to-face interviews. It is worth considering that many people may be reluctant to report to an outsider an experience as emotionally personal and as potentially controversial as, say, a crisis apparition. They may, however, be more likely to do so in a personal conversation with a sympathetic interviewer than on an impersonal questionnaire sent by an unknown researcher. Finally, the modern sampling techniques used in most recent surveys of spontaneous cases are inappropriate if one’s goal is to locate more and better spontaneous cases rather than to try to learn their incidence. It may prove useful and informative to make predictions about where one may be likely to find particular cases and then survey populations based on one’s predictions. One might predict, for example, that crisis apparitions could be more common in connection with people cut off from easy communication with their loved ones, and thus conduct a survey of relatively isolated people, such as foresters, bush pilots, or Australian ranchers.

These are but a few suggestions for specific and directed research on the survival question, and the list could be extended indefinitely; but it would perhaps be an irrelevant exercise, considering the present lack of resources and personnel available to carry out such research. Furthermore, much of the research would require mediums of high caliber and integrity, and identifying such mediums might require us to re-adopt the strategy of avoiding the most part professional mediums and instead encouraging people sympathetic to the research to attempt to develop their own medi-umistic abilities.

Nevertheless, it seems worth considering that the survival question is not the impasse that many people in recent years have assumed it to be, but is instead a crux. An impasse is a dead end or impassable way; a crux, on the other hand, is a crossroads from which one emerges along a new path. At a time when many people feel that the progress of parapsychology has stalled, we might consider whether the early psychical researchers bequeathed us, neither a dead end nor a vague philosophical puzzle, but the sources for much data and the groundwork for many lines of research that were too quickly abandoned. It is an irony of psychical
research that the near-demise of survival research came about, not because the early research was so poor, but because it was so good. Psychical researchers uncovered a remarkable amount of material related to the survival question—much more, and of much better quality, than nearly everyone expected. It seems to me that we, their successors, have given up too easily in the face of what is an undeniably complicated problem, perhaps because of giving in too easily to the modern assumption that questions such as survival are unsuitable for science.

Murphy said that "probably we have raised the question in the wrong form and . . . neither a 'yes' nor a 'no' makes very much sense" (Murphy, 1957, p. 135). Further survival-related research may ultimately indicate that both the survival hypothesis and the super-psi hypothesis contributed to the answer to a question not yet properly formulated. An analogous example frequently cited is the research on the nature of light, in which first one and then another theory was favored until a new theoretical perspective altogether showed the previous theories to be, not wrong, but incomplete and inadequate. The controversy over the question of whether psi is physical or nonphysical may turn out to be another example. Answers can only come when the questions are correctly conceived; but the new questions, and the terms in which they will be expressed, will not develop in a vacuum. They will emerge only from the testing of hypotheses, however imperfect now, that are directly concerned with the survival question.

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The Survival Question


*Department of Psychology*
*University of Edinburgh*
*7 George Square*
*Edinburgh, EH8 9JZ*
*Scotland, U.K.*