

IQBAL ON THE NATURE OF TIME

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What is the nature of time? is one of those knotty questions which have troubled the philosophical mind throughout the ages. It was hotly discussed by the ancients and the medievals and the same is the case today.

Common sense takes time vaguely to be something like a stream moving towards the future from one moment to the next—something in which events float down to the past. This is very much like saying that the stream flows in one direction, and its flow carries the floating logs of wood in the opposite direction—a palpable contradiction. This is, however, one of the many contradictions which the common sense view involves and which the philosophers have tried to remove throughout history.

The flow of time involves change and more than three thousand years ago the Vedic writers vaguely felt the difficulties involved in the idea of change and declared that the world of experience is a mere appearance of Reality and Reality itself always remains unchanged. The first great thinker who philosophised on this problem came to the same conclusion, but on purely logical grounds. It was Parmenides of Elea,¹ who was in the prime of his life in about 500 B.C. According to him, a thing either *is* or *is not*. Whatever is not, *i.e.*, has no being, cannot be thought or spoken of, for that is logically impossible. As the past can be thought or spoken of, it has not passed away into non-being, but still *is*. As the future also can be thought or spoken of, it already *is* and cannot be said to be *going to be*. Since whatever is in the past, present and future *is*, there is no coming into being or ceasing to be, no becoming and no passing away. In other words, there is no change in time. There being no change in time, Reality is eternal and unchanging.

There may be other reasons for holding the view that Reality is without change, but the reason advanced by Parmenides is not sound. It is true that whatever can be thought and spoken of in some sense *is* or exists. The present object does exist, but whatever is past has ceased to exist. What still exists and is thought and spoken of is not 'it', but a recollection or description of 'it'. Likewise whatever is in the future does not already exist.

¹ Elea was a Greek Colony in the south of Italy.

What exists and is thought and spoken of is not 'it', but an anticipation of 'it'. Parmenides' mistake lies in taking the existence of the recollection or description of an object that has passed away as the existence of that object and the existence of the anticipation of a future-event as the existence of that event. Therefore his conclusion that whatever is past, present and future exists is unwarranted and the further conclusion that there is no passing away and no becoming unjustified.

Iqbal, like Bergson, takes just the opposite view. Both of them are inspired by Heractitus (500 B.C.) who denied permanence altogether and held that reality is ever-changing and always in motion. Nothing is constant. "It is not possible to step twice in the same river". The waters of the river have already changed when you plunge into it a second time. The fact that the stone on which drops of water fall for years wears off at the point of contact, shows that a change is effected in it with the fall of each drop. In fact it ever changes by friction of one sort or another and is never the same. It is impossible to touch the same substance twice, for it is no longer the same after the first touch, even though the change is imperceptable. There is no rest; everything is continually in motion and in the process of transformation. This perpetual change of things is effected through struggle against each other. The struggle of the forces inside the drop and the stone transforms both.

Bergson accepts Heractitus's theory of continual change. Iqbal in a way accepts also his theory of perpetual struggle. With this latter theory we are not at present concerned.

Following Bergson, Iqbal makes a distinction between pure time and serial time, pure time for him is not unreal as Zeno and Plato had thought. Nor is it cyclic, everything in it repeating itself as with Heractitus and the Stoics. It is a genuine creative movement, the path of which is not already determined.

Like Bergson he holds that pure duration is identical with life and is an unceasing flow or a continual change, as perpetual flux.

دما دم رواں ہے یم زندگی

ہر اک شے سے پیدا رم زندگی

In reality there is no rest and no permanence

To real time or pure duration, the distinctions of past, present and future do not apply. In this flow, the past rolls into the present:

فریب نظر ہے سکون و ثبات

تڑپتا ہے ہر ذرہ کائنات

ٹھہرتا نہیں کاروان وجود

کہ ہر لحظہ تازہ ہے شان وجود

and the future consists only of open possibilities. Neither the future nor the past has any independent existence. Nor are distinction of hours, days and nights true of real time.

اے خوش آن روزی کہ صبح و شام نیست

صبح اورا نیم روز و شام نیست

اس شب و روز کی اور حقیقت ہے کیا

ایک زمانے کی رو جس میں نہ دن ہے نہ رات

Bergson does not deny succession to pure duration. With him the flow of pure duration is a succession of interpenetrating states. Iqbal takes away succession altogether. For him pure duration is eternity in the sense of change without succession. It is different from serial time the moments of which are successive and space the points of which are always simultaneous. If we must picture it in spatial terms, it is a line in the drawing—an actualisation of open possibilities. It is selective and purposive in the sense

that it preserves the selected remnants of the past and supplements them by continual creative activity. In this sense it is identical with history.

You can know pure duration only by looking within your own self for both space and time are states of the mind.

چشم بکشا ہر زمان و ہر مکان

این دو احوال است از احوال جاں

To explain further pure duration in its aspect of activity, Iqbal

takes a dictum of Imam Shafi'i, الوقت سيف (Time is sword) and writing under the title a whole poem of sixty one couplets in *Asrar-e-Khudi*, attempts to inject its significance into his own Bergsonian conception of pure duration, though it does not seem to have been fully assimilated by it. Pure duration which is indistinguishable from life is a cutting sword. Its flashing edge is the self.

"Its owner is exalted above hope and fear

His hand is whiter than the hand of Moses

At one stroke thereof water gushes from the rock

And the sea becomes land from dearth of moisture.

Moses held this sword in his hand,

Therefore he wrought more than man may contrive.

He clove the Red Sea asunder

And made its waters like dry earth.

The arms of 'Ali, the conqueror of Khaiber

Drew its strength from this same sword."

The self by its act seizes pure duration, nay, the relation is closer. To exist in pure duration is *to be a self*. To know pure duration we must turn our eyes from serial time and look into our own selves.

تو از شمار نفس زنده نمی دانی

که زندگی به شکست طلسم پیام است

As for Bergson, so for Iqbal, the self has two aspects. While Bergson called these aspects the fundamental self and the social self, Iqbal, more appropriately, calls them the appreciative self and the efficient self. The appreciative self lives in pure duration, in eternity which means change without succession. Its life consists in movement from appreciation to efficiency, from intuition to intellect, from pure duration to serial time which can be measured by days and nights. Serial time is born of this movement.

شام و سحر ما از گردش ما خیزد

دانی که نمی سازد این شام و سحر مارا

By making the efficient self an important stage in the outward journey of the life of the appreciative self, Iqbal assigns to it though secondary yet an important place. But there are moments when carried away by poetic contrasts he speaks of it rather disparagingly, as for example, in these lines:

اے اسیر دوش و فردا در نگر

در دل خود عالم دیگر نگر

در گلی خود تخم ظلمت کاشتی

وقت را مثل خطی پنداشتی

باز با پیمانہ لیل و نہار

فکر تو پیمود طول روزگار

وقت را مثل مکان گسترده

امتیاز دوش و فردا کرده

اے چو بو رم کرده از بستان خویش

ساختی از دست خود زندان خویش

Iqbal criticises Bergson, for making time prior to the self, which I don't think he ever did, and says that the intellect of the enduring self is prior to the multiplicity of pure duration, it seizes this multiplicity, breaks it up into an infinity of instants and transforms it to an organic whole of synthesis. He rightly accuses Bergson taking this activity of the intellect as a mere analysis. It involves as much synthesis as analysis. This organic structure of events in the life of the self constitutes its behaviour. The complete removal of succession from Bergson's conception of pure duration, has enabled Iqbal to regard the human soul as eternal and has made it easy for him to pass from the human self to the ultimate self and from the Ultimate Self to the universe, and thus to vindicate what he regards as the true philosophy of Islam. By analogy from our own self, Iqbal regards the Ultimate Reality as the Absolute Self, and Nature as its behaviour. Pure time as revealed in our own selves leads to the notion of the Ultimate Reality as Pure Duration, as change without succession, as eternity in which thought, life and purpose interpenetrate to form a unity. Again on the basis of an analogy from our efficient self, the Ultimate Self, God, is viewed in His creative activity as making Himself appear as Divine behaviour, as a *successive* creative movement, as Nature. The self as appreciative knows itself and its pure time—eternity—by direct intuition; as efficient self it tries to do so by the *intellectual* study of its *own* behaviour—personal events spread out in serial time. On the same analogy; as the appreciative self it knows God by direct intuition, and as efficient self it tries to do so through an intellectual study of *God's behaviour—of* Nature spread out in serial time. It would have been all well if Iqbal had grounded his view of the Ultimate Reality only on intuition, for an intuition it is; but by unnecessarily invoking the help of analogy he has dangerously exposed it to attacks from formal logic.

Iqbal's attitude towards the activities of the self in its relation to Nature is truly reflected in these lines:

زمانے با ارسطو آشنا باش
دمے با ساز بیکن ہمنوا باش
و لیکن از مقام شاں گزرکن
مشو گم اندریں منزل سفرکن
به آن عقلے کہ داند بیش و کم را
شناسد اندرون کان و یم را
جہاں چند و چوں زیر نگین کن
بگردوں ماہ و پرویں را کمیں کن

But in this very poem his enthusiastic preference for the intuitive approach to God makes him describe taking this journey as adorning the dead (مکر شب و (صورت نگاری مردہ) and being in the snares of nights and days (روز) and in the poem quoted before as moving inside the walls of a prison. These metaphors seem to ill accord with the idea of Nature as God's behaviour.

The difficulties in explaining time in relation to Reality forces both Bergson and Iqbal to make a profuse use of simile and metaphor, but whereas the use of simile and metaphor is an advantage inasmuch as it makes the imaginative picturing of an experience easy, it is also a disadvantage in so far as it makes acute analysis of these experiences difficult. But both of them, very consistently with their presuppositions believe that analysis, however, acute cannot be of much use in the true apprehension of Reality. But can imaginative picturing which, in their view, is also infected with space, be of any great help?

In *Payam-i-Mashriq* there is an exquisite poem entitled *Nawa-i-Waqt*, "The Song of Time." It gives expression to most of Iqbal's ideas about time in unforgettable language. I quote it in full:

خورشید به دامنم انجم به گریبانم
در من نگری پیچم در خود نگری جانم
در شهر و بیابانم در کاخ و شبستانم
من در دم و درمانم من عیش فراوانم
من تیغ جهان سوزم من چشمه حیوانم

چنگیزی و تیموری مشتتے ز غبار من
ہنگامہ افرنگی یک جسته شرار من
انسان و جهان او از نقش و نگار من
خون جگر مردان سامان بہار من
من آتش سوازنم من روضہ رضوانم

آسودہ و سیارم این طرفہ تماشبین
در بادہ امروز کیفیت فردابین

پنہاں بہ ضمیر من صد عالم رعناہیں
صد کوکب غلطان ہیں صد گنبد خضرا ہیں
من کسوت انسانم پیراہن یزدانم

تقدیر فسون من تدبیر فسون تو
تو عاشق لیلائی من دشت جنون تو
چون روح رواں پاکم از چند و چگون تو
تو راز درون من، من راز درون تو
از جان تو پیداہیم در جان تو پنہاہیم

من رپروو تو منزل من مزرع تو حاصل
تو ساز صد آہنگے تو گرمی اہیں محفل
آوارہ آب و گل! دریاہ مقام دل
گنجیدہ بہ جامے ہیں اہیں قلمز بے ساحل
از موج بلند تو سربرزدہ طوفانم