

# INTUITION IN IQBAL'S PHILOSOPHY

BY: Dr. Riffat Jehan Dawar Burki

In Iqbal's philosophy great emphasis has been laid on 'intuition' as a mode of knowledge. The word 'intuition' is derived from a verb which means 'looking at', and its extended use seems to have originated as a metaphor from sight.<sup>231</sup> "It would stand, presumably, for a mental inspection in which a direct revelation is made to the mind, comparable to the direct revelation which accompanies the exposure of physical object to the eye."<sup>232</sup> The word is used in the works of Descartes and Locke to mean the apprehension of indubitable, self-evident truths. Descartes explains how intuition is "not the fluctuating testimony of the senses, nor the misleading judgement that proceeds from the blundering constructions of imagination, but the pure intellectual cognizing of which an unclouded and attentive mind is capable, a cognizing so ready and so distinct that we are wholly freed from doubt about that which we thus intellectually apprehend."<sup>233</sup> Locke describes intuitive knowledge as "the clearest and most certain that human frailty is capable of. This part of knowledge is irresistible, and, like bright sunshine, forces itself immediately to

---

<sup>231</sup> Stocks, J. L. "Reason and Intuition" Reason and Intuition and other Essays, London 1954 P. 3.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Descartes quoted in Aaron, R. I. "Intuitive knowledge" Mind London October 1942 Volume LI No. 204 pp. 297-298.

the perceived, as soon as ever the mind turns its view that way, and leaves no room for hesitation, doubt, or examination, but the mind is perfectly filled with the clear light of it.”<sup>234</sup> Hence the traditional philosophical meaning of ‘intuition’ is knowing with absolute certainty, or knowing in such a way that there is no room for doubt.

### *Possibility of intuitive knowledge*

Kant in showing the limitations of pure reason had also demonstrated the impossibility of ‘intuitive’ experience without which metaphysics and religion are not possible. But paradoxically enough in proving the relativity of the finite objects of experience to the intelligence, he also showed “though without himself being fully conscious of it, and almost, we might say, against his will, that we cannot admit the validity of the empirical consciousness without admitting the validity of the consciousness of that which, in the narrower sense of the word, is beyond experience.”<sup>235</sup> It can be seen clearly from his Lectures that Iqbal is very anxious to show the possibility and validity of the intuitive consciousness. If intuitive experience is possible then it follows that both metaphysics and religion are possible.

Kant had rejected the possibility of metaphysics because it dealt with that which could not be systematized by the categories

---

<sup>234</sup> St- John. J. A, (Editor). The Philosophic works of John Locke, London 1843. p. 386.

<sup>235</sup> Caird, E. “The Problem of Philosophy at the Present Time” Essays on Literature, Glasgow. 1909. p. 195

of space and time and therefore, in his opinion, could not constitute knowledge, But supposing, says Iqbal, that there is more than one kind of space and one kind of time, then it is quite possible “that there are other levels of human experience capable of being systematised by other orders of space and time—levels in which concept and analysis do not play the same role as they do in the case of our normal experience.”<sup>236</sup> Iqbal agrees with Kant in regarding space and time as subjective but he does not look upon them as unvarying modes into which all our knowledge is moulded. Rather, they admit of new meaning in relation to various grades of experience and their import varies as psychic powers increase or decrease.<sup>237</sup>

Iqbāl has devoted a considerable portion of his Lectures to discussing the question of the nature of Space and Time. It was necessary for him to do so in order to demonstrate the possibility of levels of experience which were free from the “normal” spatiotemporal determinations. The importance he attached to this question can be gathered from his words, “In the history of Muslim Culture, we find that both in the realm of pure intellect and religious psychology, by which term I mean higher Sufism, the ideal revealed is the possession and enjoyment of the Infinite. In a culture with such an attitude the problem of Space and Times becomes a question of life and death.”<sup>238</sup> In the course of his discussions Iqbal has reviewed the various conceptions of Space

---

<sup>236</sup> The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam p. 183.

<sup>237</sup> Enver, I. H. Metaphysics of Iqbal, pp. 12-18

<sup>238</sup> The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 132

and Time held by thinkers from the ancient to the present times. Iqbāl's conception of Space and Time forms a very interesting part of his thought. He distinguishes between kinds of Space and Time, and points out there are levels of experience which refer not to these forms of experience in their ordinary connotation, but to "the interpenetration of the super-spatial 'here' and super-internal 'now' in the ultimate Reality."<sup>239</sup> Such an interpenetration suggests "the modern notion of space-time which Professor Alexander, in his lectures on Space, Time and Diety regards as the matrix of all things."<sup>240</sup>

Iqbāl believes, then, in potential types of consciousness which lie close to our normal consciousness and yield life and knowledge.<sup>241</sup> Such knowledge is gained through intuition. Iqbāl describes the main features of intuitive experience when he enumerates the characteristics of mysticism which deals with the ultimate by way of intuitive apprehension."<sup>242</sup>

### *Characteristics of Intuitive (Mystic) Experience*

(a) The characteristic of intuition which has traditionally been most emphasised is its indubitability. "Intuitionism is the theory which asserts, in the face of all aseptical criticism, that absolutely certain knowledge occurs in human experience."<sup>243</sup> Iqbāl states

---

<sup>239</sup> The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 137.

<sup>240</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.* p. 185

<sup>242</sup> Undehrill, E. "Can the new Idealism dispense with Mysticism ? Relativity, Logic and Mysticism. p. 151.

<sup>243</sup> Aaron, J. J. "Intuitive Knowledge" *Mind* October, 1942 Vol. LI No. 294 p. 317

that according to the Qor'an, the heart of 'qalb' (the seat of intuition) is "something which 'sees' and its reports, if properly interpreted, are never false."<sup>244</sup>

(b) It is immediate experience of Reality. A notable writer on mysticism writes, "we can claim for those whom we call mystics—and, in a lesser degree, for innumerable artists and contemplative souls—that experience at its fullest and deepest does include the immediate apprehension of an unchanging Reality, and that this apprehension, in one form or another, is the sheet-anchor of the religious consciousness."<sup>245</sup>

Intuitive experience is direct like perception but sensation is not involved in it. As Plato said, intuitions come "in a flash."<sup>246</sup> Iqbal says:

عشق کی اک جست نے طے  
کر دیا قصہ تمام  
اس زمین و آسمان کو بیکراں  
سمجھا تھا میں

<sup>247</sup>(BM-e-Jibril, p. 29)

---

<sup>244</sup> The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 16

<sup>245</sup> Underhill, E. "Can the new Idealism disperse with Mysticism," pp 149-150.

<sup>246</sup> Aaron, R. I, "Intuitive Knowledge" p. 317.

<sup>247</sup> In one leap love traversed the whole length, I had thought that the earth and sky were boundless.

or, as he says in the Introduction to Zabur-e-A jam

وادی عشق بسے دور و دراز  
است ولے  
طے شود جادہ صد سالہ باھے  
گاھے

<sup>248</sup>(Zabur-e-A jam, p. 2)

For Iqbal the immediacy of mystic experience lies in that in it God is known as other objects are known. “God is not a mathematical entity or a system of concept mutually related to one another and having no reference to experience.”<sup>249</sup> As Ibn Arabi pointed out, God is a percept not a concept.<sup>250</sup>

(c) Intuitive experience possesses an unanalysable wholeness. In it Reality is given as one indivisible unity. Iqbal compares intuitive consciousness with discursive consciousness. “When I experience the table before me, innumerable data of experience merge into the single experience of the table. Out of this wealth of data I select those that fall into a certain order of space and time and round them off in reference to the table. In the mystic state, however vivid, such analysis is not possible.”<sup>251</sup> A writer

---

<sup>248</sup> Very far and wide is the valley of love, But there are times when the journey of a hundred years is completed in the duration of a sigh, (Translation by Singh, I. The Ardent Pilgrim p. 168.

<sup>249</sup> The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 18

<sup>250</sup> Ibid. p. 183.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

observes that, here, Iqbāl is denying, by inference, that immediacy to normal experiences which he associated with them earlier.<sup>252</sup> But a closer analysis shows that Iqbāl is not denying the immediacy of sense-perception but rather trying to show the relative importance of analysis in the two types of consciousness. The rational consciousness specialises in analysis and synthesis but in the mystic consciousness all the diverse stimuli run into one another forming a single unanalysable unity in which the ordinary distinctness of subject and object does not exist.<sup>253</sup> The distinction between the discursive and intuitive consciousness as regards the apprehension of part and whole has also been brought out by H.H. Price. “In discursive consciousness, there is a passage of the mind from one item to another related item, for instance, from a subject to a concept under which we classify it, or from premises to conclusion...And when we have discursive consciousness of a whole or complex of any sort (as in counting) although the whole may be vaguely present to the mind from the first, yet definite consciousness of the whole comes after consciousness of the parts. In intuitive consciousness, on the other hand, consciousness of the whole comes before definite consciousness of the parts. And there is no passage of the mind; whatever we intuit is present all at once. We might say that intuitive consciousness is “totalistic”, not “progressive” or “additive”.<sup>254</sup>

---

<sup>252</sup> Rahman, F. “Iqbal and Mysticism” Iqbal as a Thinker

<sup>253</sup> The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, pp. 18-191.

<sup>254</sup> Price, H. H. Perception, London, 1932, pp. 151-152.

(d) Intuitive experience is objective. Iqbal thinks it is erroneous to think that the mystic state is “a mere retirement into the mists of pure subjectivity.”<sup>255</sup> The mystic, for instance, experiences God or the ultimate Reality as both imminent and transcendent. He is in direct communion with the ‘Other’ and momentarily loses consciousness of himself as a distinct and private personality.<sup>256</sup> But he emerges from his experience possessing “a Supreme Richness — unspeakable Concreteness — overwhelming Aliveness, having been a witness to that Being which gives Becoming all its worth”.<sup>257</sup>

Iqbal compares the objectivity of intuitive experience with the objectivity of social experience. We know other minds only by inference and yet “the knowledge that the individual before us is a conscious being floods our mind as an immediate experience.”<sup>258</sup> One test of the objectivity of our social experience is that other persons respond to us. Iqbal bases the objectivity of religious experience on the testimony of the Qo’ran that God responds to our call: “And your Lord saith, call Me and I respond to your call” (40:62) “And when My servants ask thee concerning Me, then I am nigh unto them and answer the cry of him that crieth unto Me.” (2:182).<sup>259</sup>

---

<sup>255</sup> Khatoon, J. *The Place of God, Man and Universe in Iqbal’s Philosophic System* p. 12.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> F. von. Hugel quoted by Underhill, E. “Can the new Idealism dispense with Mysticism?” p. 152.

<sup>258</sup> Khatoon, J. *The Place of God, Man and Universe in the System of Iqbal*, p. 13.

<sup>259</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 19-20



Iqbal advances another argument to substantiate the claim that religious experience—which is based on intuition—is objective. “The very fact that religious life is divided into periods indicates that like the student of the scientific method, the practical student of religious psychology learns to sift experience critically in order to eliminate all subjective elements, psychological or physiological, in the content of his experience with a view finally to reach what is absolutely objective.”<sup>260</sup>

To meet the charge that intuitive experience is purely subjective, Iqbal points out a number of times that intuition is not a faculty of knowledge qualitatively distinct from reason or perception, but rather as a quality which is implicit in cognition at every level.<sup>261</sup> Thus while intuition is feeling, this does not mean that it is purely subjective since feeling itself has cognitive content as Bradley and Whitehead have shown.<sup>262</sup> In Iqbal’s opinion, this may be seen if we reflect on the character of our knowledge of our Self. Man rises from the intuition of the finite self to the awareness of life as a centralising ego and the ultimate experience of God as a universal, unifying, toiling power.

(e) Intuitive experience is incommunicable. One of the most oft-repeated objections to intuitive experience is that being incommunicable, its reality cannot really be established. To this Evelyn Underhill would reply: “If impressibility be indeed the criterion of the real, as some philosophers have dared to

---

<sup>260</sup> The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, pp. 197

<sup>261</sup> Whittemore, R. “Iqbal’s Panentheism” Iqbal Review April. 1966. p. 70

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

suggest—and this leads us to the strange spectacle of a Real World laboriously keeping pace with the expanding vocabulary of man—not only our mystical but our highest aesthetic and passionate experiences<sup>263</sup>, must be discredited; for it is notorious that in all these supreme ways of human knowing and feeling, only a part of that which is apprehended can be expressed; and that the more completed and soul-satisfying the experience the more its realization approximates to the mystic’s silence where all lovers lose themselves.”<sup>264</sup>

According to Iqbal, the incommunicability or inexpressibility of mystic experience is due to the fact that it is essentially a matter of inarticulate feeling, untouched by discursive intellect.<sup>265</sup> But intuitive experience has a cognitive content which can be translated into idea. Feeling is outward—pushing as idea is outward reporting.<sup>266</sup> The mystic reports not directed but through symbols and “the wonder surely is not that these reports tell so little; but—when we consider our human situation and resources—that they tell so much. The reports are always oblique, but so are the reports of all artists; of whom it is probably true to say that the greater the aesthetic values which they seek to communicate, the more oblique is the method involved.”<sup>267</sup>

---

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Underhill, E. “Can the new Idealism dispense with Mysticism.” p. 153.

<sup>265</sup> The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 21.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Underhill. E. “Can the new Idealism dispense with Mysticism” pp. 153-154.

(f) According to Iqbal, intuitive experience reveals Reality as an eternal ‘now’ and reveals the unreality of the serial character of time and space.<sup>268</sup> “All intense religious experience—more than this, all experience in which transcendental feeling is involved—appears to be accompanied by a marked slowing-down of consciousness, a retreat to some deeper levels of apprehension where reality is experienced not merely as succession but as existence: a genuine escape from the tyranny of “clock-time”, though not a transcendence of duration.”<sup>269</sup>

But according to Iqbal this state, does not abide, although it gives a sense of overwhelming authority to those who have experienced it.

Both the mystic and the prophet return to levels of ordinary experience, but for Iqbal the return of the prophet is of greater meaning than that of the mystic.<sup>270</sup>

(j) Mystic experience springs from the ‘heart’ but it is not qualitatively different from ‘normal’ experience. According to Iqbal, the seat of intuition is the ‘heart’ which in the beautiful words of Rumi, feeds on the rays of the sun and brings us into contact with aspects of Reality other than those open to sense-perception.”<sup>271</sup> Professor Nicholson tells that in mystic thought, “the qalb, though connected in some mysterious way with the

---

<sup>268</sup> Khatoon, J. *The Place of God, Man and Universe in the Philosophic System of Iqbal*, p. 13.

<sup>269</sup> Underhill, E. “Can the new Idealism dispense with Mysticism?”. p. 157

<sup>270</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 22-23

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

physical heart, is not a thing of flesh and blood.” Unlike the English ‘heart’ its nature is rather intellectual than emotional, but whereas the intellect cannot gain real knowledge of God, the qalb is capable of knowing the essences of all things, and when illuminated by faith and knowledge reflects the whole content of the divine mind, hence the Prophet said, “My Earth and My Heaven contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant contains Me.”<sup>272</sup>

Iqbal does not regard intuitive experience as ‘mysterious’. It is “a mode of dealing with Reality in which sensation, in the physiological sense of the word does not play any part. Yet the vista of experience thus opened to us is as real and concrete as any other experience.”<sup>273</sup> Iqbal differs from William James who regards religious experience as being completely unconnected with normal experience. According to William James, religious experience cannot be deduced by analogy from other sorts of experience. It refers to a wider spiritual environment which the ordinary, prudential self cannot enter.<sup>274</sup> Iqbal, on the other hand, extends the sphere of normal experience to cover mystic experience, since whatever be the mode of knowledge, it is the same Reality which operates on us.<sup>275</sup>

---

<sup>272</sup> Nicholson, R. A. *The Mystics of Islam*. London 1914 p. 68

<sup>273</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 16.

<sup>274</sup> Khatoon, J. *The Place of God, Man and Universe in the Philosophic System of Iqbal*, p. 21

<sup>275</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 18

(h) Intuitive experience reveals life as a centralising ego. It makes us aware of “the simple fact of experience that life is not a formless fluid, but an organizing principle of unity, a synthetic activity which holds together and focalizes the dispersing dispositions of the living organism for a constructive purpose.”<sup>276</sup> The intellect tries to reduce the rich variety of experience to a concept, but intuition does not proceed by universalization and as a consequence is able to reveal the true character of concrete things, namely, that every living entity converges upon an egohood.<sup>277</sup> Like the existentialists Iqbal holds that the intuitive consciousness grasps Reality not in an abstract theoretical way but in a decisively personal manner.<sup>278</sup> This ‘intuitive insight into individual essence’ has been aptly described by Mr. Roth writing on the philosophy of Spinoza: “Abstract recognition passes into concrete appreciation. Man is then conscious of nature as a unity, but not as before from the outside. He feels it in himself; he understands its wholeness in and from his own being. He thus not only contemplates externally the ways of the universe in which, like everything else, he is caught up. He not only sees himself as one item in the detail controlled by an all-embracing cosmic order. Nature for him is more than an abstract whole of general laws. It is a concrete system of self-directing individualities. He knows himself in it as an individual, and realizes his place in it among

---

<sup>276</sup> Ibid. op. 61-61.

<sup>277</sup> Malik, G. R. “The Nature of Ego” p. 45

<sup>278</sup> Erfan, N. “What is Common between the Existentialists and Iqbal” p. 26

other individuals. He grasps both himself and things, not in their universal aspect only, but in their unique singularity.”<sup>279</sup>

---

<sup>279</sup> Mr. Roth quoted in Stocks, J. L. “Reason and Intuition”. p. 12.