

# IQBAL'S CONCEPT OF THE SELF

(A Philosophical Analysis)

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Self is taken to mean a sort of system or unity of psycho-physical experiences. We may analyse our mental states, at any moment of our life, into certain elementary experiences, which, however, never exist in a vacuum, These experiences are found as parts of an organic unity but this unity does not exist apart from its constituent states, The questions that crop up in this context involve the very crucial issue whether this unity is something above and beyond its contents ; how these disparate psycho-physical experiences are -united ; its quality of uniqueness and persistence through changes, etc., etc.

The meaning of the self, with its metaphysical, psychological and semantic distinctions, has become so ambiguous that many contemporary philosophers prefer to avoid the word 'self' altogether. They discuss the problem exclusively in terms of the word 'person'. Some philosophers have doubted and even denied the existence of the self. For Hume, for example, apart from the bundle of successive bits of perception, nothing justifying the concept of the self can be discerned by introspection. The problem of the self, it may be pointed out, derived its significance as well as relevance from the traditional method of starting with one's own case. The contemporary approach, on the other hand, is based on the contention that there is no distinction between identity in ones own case and identity in the case of others. This amounts to the contention that an understanding of the identity of persons in general is ipso facto an understanding of ones own identity. This is the reason why most of the contemporary philosophers refuse to

proceed to the problem of personal identity through that of the self. Rather, they are wont to reject the latter as a pseudo problem. In Iqbal's case, however, the problem of the self is of paramount importance. He sticks to the traditional approach of starting with one's own case and treats the whole issue in the context of 'self' rather than that of 'person'.

Iqbal begins by criticising those who regard the self to be a separate entity over and above the mental states and experiences. He attacks the position taken by al-Ghazali, for whom the ego is a simple, indivisible and immutable soul-substance. The multiple experiences come and go but the 'soul-substance' remains the same for ever. This definition of self, however, does not give us any clue as to its nature. Firstly, it is a metaphysical entity and it has been assumed to explain our experiences. But, do our experiences inhere in it as colour inheres in a body — are they related to it as qualities are related to material substance? Iqbal's reply is in the negative. Secondly, Iqbal agrees with Kant that the unity of experience on which the simplicity and hence the immutability of the soul-substance is based neither proves its indivisibility nor immutability.

Iqbal also rejects 'the bundle theory of the self' as represented by Hume and the psychologists. It regards the self to be a mere flux of sensations, feelings and thought. It studies them separately and does not specify how the one is connected with the other. This reduces the self to a mere accumulation of experiences. The self, however, is not a mere bundle of experiences. There is, behind all the multiple experiences, an inner unity also. For Iqbal, it is this unity which is the pivot of all experiences. It is the nucleus of our existence.

Obviously, Iqbal formulates his theory of the self with reference to both Kant and Hume. His most comprehensive statement on this issue is that follows: "I do not mean to say that the ego is over and above the mutually penetrating multiplicity we call experience. Inner experience is the ego at work. We appreciate the ego itself in the act of perceiving, judging and willing. The life of the ego is a kind of tension caused by the ego invading the

environment and environment invading the ego. The ego does not stand outside this arena of mutual invasion. It is present in it as a directive energy and is formed and disciplined by its own experience.”<sup>170</sup> For Iqbal, the experience of consciousness is “a case of tension, a state of self-concentration, by means of which life manages to shut out all memories and associations which have no bearing on a present action it has no well-defined fringes, it shrinks and expands as the occasion demands... Thus consciousness is... not a substance but an organizing principle, a specific mode of behaviour essentially different to the behavior of an externally worked machine.”<sup>171</sup>

Apparently, it is in Hume’s view of consciousness that one fails to find any ‘organizing principle’ at all. It was Hume who refused to provide any link among the atomic units of sensations. There is, on the other hand, obvious sympathy on the part of Iqbal for Kant’s standpoint that thinking implies prior unity of consciousness, though Iqbal is not willing to forego empirical consciousness for the sake of reason. He agrees with Kant that human reason has its utility within the sphere of the natural world. But he rejects Kantian division of the scopes of will and reason, reality and phenomenon, on the grounds that it does not truly represent man as we find him in experience. So, Iqbal rejects both the Humean brand of empiricism and Kantian rationalism.

It is obvious that neither Hume’s atomic sensations nor Kant’s rational categories are acceptable to Iqbal for his idea of the self. Iqbal, however, agrees with Kantian objections to the conception of the soul as a metaphysical entity. “The ‘I think’ which accompanies every thought is, according to Kant, a purely formal condition of thought, and the transition from a purely formal condition of thought to ontological substance is

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<sup>170</sup> Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought\* In Islam*, Lahore, 1968, p. 102.

<sup>171</sup> *The Reconstruction*, pp. 40-41.

logically illegitimate.”<sup>172</sup> Further, Kant asserts that indestructibility of the substance cannot be logically inferred from its indivisibility ; for the indivisible substance either gradually or all of a sudden may disappear into nothingness. Iqbal accepts this argument and, agrees with Kant that indestructibility of the soul cannot be proved from its indivisibility.

These difficulties led Iqbal to assimilate contrasting ideas from rationalism, empiricism and transcendentalism. This mode of action, however, cannot provide the sort of reality he wishes to assign to his ‘self’ or ‘ego’. while on the one hand he turns to the experience of consciousness as we find it in ourselves he also brings in the more private concept of ‘inner experience’. He, however, clearly accepts normal experience as the point of departure for understanding his ‘ego’. There are striking remarks throughout his work which betray his desire to keep himself within the domain of experience while dealing with the concept of the ego. In the *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* he equates it with “the system of experiences”,<sup>173</sup> while in the *Secrets of the Self*, he is convinced that the “inexplicable finite centre of experience is the fundamental fact of the universe.”<sup>174</sup> In fact, his criticism of the ego regarded as soul-substance follows from his view that “the interpretation of our conscious experience is the only road by which we can reach the ego, if at all.”<sup>175</sup> Iqbal, even, tends to make body as the basic element in the construction of the ego — “The body is accumulated action or habit of the soul...”<sup>176</sup> Elsewhere, he calls the soul an organ of the body and again claims that “yet another make of man develops on the basis of physical organism.”<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>173</sup> *The Reconstruction*, p. 106.

<sup>174</sup> Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *Secrets of the Self (Asrar-i Khudi)*, translated by RA. Nicholson, London, 1920. Preface, p. xvii.

<sup>175</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 101.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-5.

Iqbal, then, shifts ground and concludes, in Kantian manner, that there had to be an “I”—a profounder ego, which constantly acts through the physical ‘colony of sub-egos’, enabling one ‘to build up a systematic unity of experience’. So after rejecting both parallelism and interactionism as unsatisfactory and trying to visualize mind and body as ‘one in action’, he agrees to admit the supremacy of the mental over the physical.

Here, Iqbal introduces an enlarged concept of thought which in its “deeper movement” is supposed to be “identical with life.” Obviously, he is in search of a unifying element which may synthesize diverse experiences which go to make the self. In his own words: “While it (thought) appears to break up reality into static fragments, its real function is to synthesize the elements of experience by employing categories suitable to the various levels which experience presents.”<sup>178</sup> He, however, gives no precise list of such categories, nor does he tell us how to apply them to the level of consciousness. Elsewhere, he takes thought “not as a principle which organises and integrates its material from the outside, but as a potency which is formative of the very being of its material.”<sup>179</sup> So, Iqbal visualises thought as a potency which has the capacity to provide a link between diverse experiences. In order to explain this unifying quality of thought he likens it to “the seed from which the very beginning carries within itself the organic unity of the tree.”<sup>180</sup> In this manner, he intends to provide an active, continuous and unified self. He further explains the nature of this unifying agent by equating it with an act as against a thing. My experience is only a series of acts, mutually referring to one another, and held together by the unity of a directive purpose. “Hence, the true essence of the ego lies in the directive and purposive attitudes, in judgments, will-attitudes, aims and aspirations.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> The Reconstruction, p. 52.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. b.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

It may be argued that Iqbal has come full circle from his criticism of Hume's 'bundle theory of the self' for not providing a precise and tangible unifying element, and then himself refusing to give a clearly defined formulae according to which the multiplicity of mental states merge and interpenetrate one another. But, since he characterises life as only a series of acts of attention, and an act of attention cannot be explained without referring to ends and purposes, it is obvious that purpose plays a significant role in the activity of the ego. He warns, however that the purpose here is not a predetermined, fixed goal, which acts from outside. Ego as a unity of active experience is self-directed. Apparently, Iqbal is trying to ward off the danger of a mechanistic, lifeless element intruding into his concept of the self.

Iqbal also faced the problem ; how to reconcile unity with activity. Personal activity characterising his view of the ego is 'a peculiar type of organisation which transcends the concept of homogeneous unity as well as the sheer multiplicity of numerical states. But, the crucial question is: is it logical to claim 'a unity in multiplicity'. The dilemma he faced was seemingly unsolvable. By keeping the self firmly grounded in the realm of experience he tried to avoid the artificial and empty ego of Kant — on the other hand, in asserting that self transcends any particular mental state, he appears to take the self outside the realm of experience. Iqbal's 'finite centre of experience' or 'a directive energy' are nothing but metaphysical substance come to life again. It is a difficult problem which Iqbal faced in the same spirit as al-Ghazali and Kant. One must appreciate the fact that Iqbal was conscious of this difficulty and himself tried to find possible ways out. Finally, he seems to have fallen back upon a vague type of mental substance for, formulating his concept of the self.

### **Personal Identity**

Personal identity is individual identity as possessed by a person or self. An individual, whether an in-animate thing, a living organism or a conscious self, is identical in so far as it preserves from moment to moment a similarity

of structure. Personal identity involves in addition the conscious recognition of sameness. Various empiricists have stated that we can know that P is one and the same person as an earlier person only if we can show bodily continuity of memory and character. This is called the identifying criteria. Such criteria could hardly be fulfilled by bodily persons since lack of body rules- out one definite check right away. It also prevents us from having performance against which to check memory claims and with which to assess character. Since a criteria based purely on bodily continuity fails to explain all the various aspects involved in the concept of person, philosophers have used various other notions to explain personal identity, e.g., rational and intentional system, ability to use language, being conscious and self-conscious, being a moral agent etc.

As pointed out above, Iqbal's main concern was with the problem of the self rather than with that of person. Moreover, he was essentially interested in personal immortality rather than personal identity, There is, therefore, no thoroughly worked out theory of personal identity as such in his writings. However, he shows some interest in this issue to merit consideration. He approaches the issue from various angles. To begin with he claims that "the unity of human consciousness constitutes the centre of human personality."<sup>182</sup> In this context he refers to "the unity of inner experience" as well as to the "unknown levels of consciousness"<sup>183</sup> He also asserts that ego reveals itself as a unity of what we call mental states — it is a unity which, grows out of body — 'the colony of sub-egos from which a profounder ego emerges'. Mind and body become one in action, and ego is a system of acts. He also mentions insight and striving in this context <sup>184</sup>

Perhaps, the most comprehensive statement concerning the problem of personal identity is found in the following passage by Iqbal. "In order to recognise you, I must have known you in the past. My recognition of a place

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<sup>182</sup> The Reconstruction, pp. 95-96.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. pp. 96-106.

or person means reference to my past experience, and not to the past experience of another ego. It is this unique inter-relation of our mental states that we express by the word 'I'<sup>185</sup> So, the criteria of personal identity, for Iqbal, finally lies in the nature of this 'I'. Moreover, "to be a self is to be able to say 'I am' ".<sup>186</sup> It means, in effect, that for Iqbal, the self is the criterion or standard ( f personal identity. By maintaining itself in a continuous state of tension, and in its "effort to be something" the ego discovers "its final opportunity to sharpen its objectivity and acquire a more fundamental 'I am'"<sup>187</sup>

Objections have been raised against such use of the word in this context. The problem is largely that of meaning. Obviously, the use of the word 'I' as the criterion of personal identity suffers from a certain grammatical confusion. The 'I' in the phrase 'I am' cannot be said to refer to something particular. But can this purpose be served by converting 'I' into 'it'. For, if 'I think' creates problems, it is in the fitness of things to say that 'It thinks in me' just as we say 'It rains here'. But the word is not used to name a person just as the word 'here' is not used to name a place. It is much more informative to say that 'John thinks' as does 'It rains in London', Hence, self-identification in the sense of 'I am' itself is illusory and cannot give meaning to a view of personal identity.

The above criticism loses much of its sting if it is realized that (i) Iqbal was not using the word 'I' in the frame-work of a theory of meaning. It would, therefore, be a bit misplaced to criticise him in this context. (ii) Iqbal's use of 'I' in his 'I am' stands for what he terms as self and the problem of personal identity is thus regarded as the problem of the self. My contention, here, is that Iqbal was primarily concerned with the problem of the self and treated the issue of personal identity only by implication.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid. p. 100.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p. 56.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. p. 198.