

IQBAL'S CONCEPT OF THE PERFECT MAN

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The self in man, his I—amness, has specifically earthly antecedents. There are a number of Qur'anic verses which, in slightly different phraseologies assert that man has been created out of clay. Iqbal, in this connection refers to the verses 23:12-14.

Now of fine clay have we created man, then we placed him, a moist germ, in a safe abode, then made we the moist germ a clot of blood, then made the clotted blood into a piece of flesh, then made the piece of flesh into bones, and we clothed the bones, and we clothed the bones with flesh, then brought forth man of yet another make...¹⁸⁰

Given here is in a brief description of the various stages in the development and growth of the human individual. However, this is not Darwinian type of evolution where subsequent stages could invariably be explained in the light of the earlier ones and in accordance with certain well-defined scientific principles. Instead, the Qur'an appears to conceive that man is the result of a process known as 'emergent evolution' i.e. a process in which at a particular stage some novel characteristics suddenly and spontaneously appears. Thus he can be declared as a special creation in spite of his naturalistic lineage. This is evident from the sentence "...then brought forth man of yet another make" in the above quotation. Man alone has been described as the bearer of the Divine Trust which was granted to him by God and which the heavens and the earth had earlier refused to accept. The phenomenon of special creation is also clear from the verses Mike!

¹⁸⁰ Quran, 33: 72.

So when I have made him (i.e. man) complete and breathed into him of my spirit...¹⁸¹.

(God) said: O Iblis: what prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I have created with My hands...¹⁸²

Iqbal interprets the incident of ‘breathing of the the Divine soul into man’ as a ‘kind of waking from the dream of nature with a throb of personal causality in one’s own being’, or as ‘a rising from simple consciousness to a state of self-awareness’.

From the verse I breathed into him of My spirit ‘ and others of its kind some thinkers, incidentally, have ventured to conclude that soul or mind is a separate, independent substance in the human organism. This is also the layman’s point of view. Dualism of mind and body thus conceived has raised a host of psychological, metaphysical, ethical as well as eschatological problems that have kept most of the Muslim mystics and philosophers' busy working out their details and implications. How-ever, the Qur’an itself, when carefully perused does not appear to subscribe to the substantiality of the human soul nor, consequently, to the possibility of its disembodied existence. For instance, it is commonly believed that long before man appeared in the spatiotemporal world, God convened a meeting of the souls of all men who were to be created till the last Day and got a commitment from them that He is their Lord. The only Qur’anic verse supposed to have mentioned this incident reads as follows.

When thy Lord drew forth from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendents, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying), “Am I not your Lord” They said: “Yea: we do testify” Lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: “Of this we were never mindful”¹⁸³.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 15: 29.

¹⁸² Qur’an, 38: 75.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 7: 172.

Obviously, there is no mention here of souls or spirits as such. The verse really relates an incident of a man-God encounter as the surest mode of delivering faith in the godhead of Allah to the primordial nature of man. Also, in the hereafter, every-person will retain his total psycho-physical individuality as he will not only remember his own past deeds¹⁸⁴ but also recognize other individuals who were known to him in the world there before¹⁸⁵. Further the upholders of the dualism of human nature sometimes point out that soul and body depend for their development on different sets of factors which have nothing to do one with the other: body requires the consumption of foods and drinks whereas soul requires the inculcation of moral and spiritual values. The Qur'an does not as well permit this distinction which would incidentally amount to an estrangement between the religious and the worldly. According to the Qur'an bodily needs are to be fulfilled only in a manner that is approved by the volitional standards of spiritualism; and, correspondingly, the spiritual values are to be implemented not entirely independently but with due regard to the natural comforts of the body. No less than a comprehensive development of man as a whole, taking into consideration both his aspects, is the explicit as well as the implicit aim of Qur'anic teachings. When terms like *nafs*, *ruh*, *bison* are — used in the Qur'an to refer to the human individual, they signify his entire personality.

The word 'human ego' or *Khudi* used by Iqbal likewise is taken by him to mean the unity and totality of the human person. He rejects the dualist theory of mind and body because parallelism and interactionism both lead to various sorts of oddities and contradictions. The former “reduces the soul to a merely passive spectator of the happenings of the body” ; as to the latter, “we cannot find any observable facts to show how and where exactly their interaction takes place and which of the two takes the initiative. The soul is an organ of the body which exploits it for physiological purposes, or the body is an instrument of the soul, are equally true proposition on the theory

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 6: 28.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 10: 45.

of interactionism”.¹⁸⁶ Mind and body, in fact, belong to the same system, says Iqbal. Matter is “spirit in space-time reference”¹⁸⁷. It is “a colony of egos of a low order out of which emerges the ego of a higher order. The physical organism reacting to environments gradually builds up a systematic unity of experience which we call the human ego”.¹⁸⁸

The ego or self that man is has two aspects, according to Iqbal—the 'appreciative self' and the efficient self.¹⁸⁹ The former for which he also uses various alternative phrases like the 'deeper self', the 'inner centre of experience', the root of being' etc. lives in pure duration while the latter deals with serial time. In our day-to-day life we are so much absorbed with the world of space and time that we entirely lose sight of the fundamental or the appreciative 'I' within. It is, for Iqbal, incumbent upon a person to realize it not only in order to qualify himself for an encounter with the 'Great' I Am' and prepare himself for authentic relations with other human beings but also because this achievement would make him a human person in the full sense of the term “To exist in pure duration”, says Iqbal, “is to be a self and to be a self is to be able to say 'I am'. It is the degree of intuition of I—amness that determines the place of a thing in the scale of being”¹⁹⁰.

How do I discover and recognize my self? Iqbal's answer is that, being most simple, fundamental and profound. I—amness is neither an object of perception nor simply an idea to be logically inferred and rationally conceived. It can, in the final analysis, only be known through a flash of intuitive insight. David Mume, the British empiricist, for instance, is well-known for his attempt to reach the self through channels which are purely of sensory, empirical nature. In his 'A Treatise of Human Nature', he wrote: “...when I enter most intimately into what I call myself I always stumble on

¹⁸⁶ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 105.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch 'myself' at any time without a percept and never can observe anything but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as my sound sleep, so long I am insensible of 'myself' and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death...I should be entirely annihilated"¹⁹¹. He thus concluded that there is no such thing as or 'self' and that a person's mind is nothing but a medley of different perceptions. Hume's supposition here is that all knowledge is to be furnished by sense experience. This leaves no scope for a permanent, non-successional being. Decartes, on the other hand, represents those who followed the course of reason. Being himself a brilliant mathematician and a discoverer of Analytical Geometry, he was firmly of the opinion that for philosophy a method could be discovered on the analogy of the one used in mathematical sciences, where we start with certain simple, self-evident principles, rising by degrees to the complex ones—thus building up an entire system of thought. So he set out in search of the indubitable and the self-evident. This he did by a grand process of elimination. He doubted away everything he could possibly doubt: the testimony of his senses, his memory, the existence of the physical world, his own body and even the truths of mathematics. One thing, however, he found, he could not possibly doubt and that was the fact of his own existence, his own self, his I—amness. It is he after all who had been performing the activity of doubting all the time. Doubting is a form of thinking. 'I think', he concluded, 'therefore I am', meaning to say, 'I exist'. This argument, the critics have pointed out, is fallacious on many grounds. For one thing, the conclusion to which the entire reasoning leads could only be that "there is a state of doubt", and that's all., At the most a logical 'I', which in fact is the subject of all propositions that are made, can be asserted. From this to skip over to the factual existence of an 'I', as Descartes really does, is a leap which cannot at all be justified.

¹⁹¹ Book I part IV.

Iqbal thus appears to be right when he holds that both sense-experience as well as reason, forms of perception as well as categories of understanding, are only meant to equip us for our dealings with the spatio-temporal world: they are not capable of reaching the core of one's being. In fact "in our constant pursuit after external things we weave a kind of veil round the appreciative self which thus becomes alien to us. It is only in the moments of profound meditation", he goes on to observe, "when the efficient self is in abeyance, that we sink into our deeper self and reach the inner centre of experience".¹⁹² On these premises, neither the mutakallimun nor the philosophers but the devotional sufis alone have truly been able to understand the nature of the human soul. The meditation, referred to here, is either pure meditation through which ideationally I remove from my self all that is not essentially 'me' i.e. all that I possess due to my specific historical' and geographical' situation, in the broadest sense of these terms. Or it may be the meditation charged with activity in which case I practically eradicate from my nature exclusive love for, and involvement with, the world which is the cause of my alienation from the source and ground of my existence. The second meaning particularly is accepted by the mystics of Islam. The sufistic path formally begins with the inculcation of the virtue of tauba (repentance) which signifies purification of soul and the deliverance of it from all extraneous material so that the divine within it stands realized. "The adherents of mystical religions", says G.S. Spinks, "feel compelled to empty their psychical life...in order to achieve by personality-denying techniques an emptiness that will prepare the way for the incoming of the Divine"¹⁹³.

It is to be hurriedly pointed out here that neither according to genuine sufism nor in the thought-system of Iqbal himself does this 'personality-denying' phenomenon stand for self-mortification or asceticism. The world is not to be disparaged and renounced because in fact there is nothing detestable about it as such. It could be as sacred as the spiritual realm. Iqbal's

¹⁹² The Reconstruction of Religious Thought In Islam, p. 96.

¹⁹³ Psychology of Religion, p. 128.

emphasis on the revilement of the inner being of man is simply aimed, as shown above, at the realization of one's own Divine nature, There is a tradition of the Holy Prophet (peace be on him) which says: Verily God created man after His own image¹⁹⁴. God is above all determinations and limits man must therefore shed off limitations that make up his efficient personality and tear away the web that he has woven —warily or unwarily— around his original self. It is to this original self that the Qur'an refers when it says: He is indeed successful who causes it to grow ; and he indeed fails who buries it¹⁹⁵. This discovery necessarily gives to man a simple, fresh, uncontaminated point of view with which to look at everything, a sure ground from which to take off and start a truly authentic existence.

Realization of the appreciative self is thus not an end in itself. It only amounts to revolutionizing the behaviour of the man-in-the-world. This fact is well-evidenced by the way of the prophets as conceived by Iqbal. He defines a prophet "as a type of mystic consciousness in which unitary experience tends to overflow its boundaries and seeks opportunities of redirecting or refashioning the forces of collective life. In his personality the finite centre of life sinks into his own infinite depth only to spring up again, with fresh vigour to destroy the old and to disclose the new directions of life"¹⁹⁶. Prophet Mohammad (peace be on him) has, in fact, been accepted by Iqbal as the ideal of perfect manhood in Islam.

Iqbal is a process philosopher. In the preface to his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, he significantly points out that the Qur'an emphasizes deed rather than idea. The Qur'an says: "(God) created death and life that He might try you—which of you is best in deeds"¹⁹⁷. Not fatalism and inactivity but ever-continuing formation of fresh goals and their perpetual realization is the desirable style of life for the soldier of the moral

¹⁹⁴ ان الله خلق آدم على صورته [كمال]

¹⁹⁵ Quran, 91: 9.

¹⁹⁶ *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 126.

¹⁹⁷ Quran, 67: 2.

ideal. The essence of perfect manhood lies in a constant state of tension. The ego, throughout its career continues invading the environments and the environments invading the ego. The appreciative self, being a pure receptacle of Divine illumination as shown above, plays the role of a directive agent in this mutual invasion in order to shape the person's own destiny as well as that of the universe. Sometimes he is called upon to adjust the forces of the universe. Thus, gradually and surely, his personality continues to be integrated more and more so that ultimately it is ensured against all possibilities of dissolution or extinction. "That which tends to maintain the state of tension tends to make us immortal," says Iqbal. Further, "the idea of personality gives us a standard of value: it settles the problem of good and evil. That which fortifies personality is good, that which weakens it is bad. Art, religion and ethics must be judged from the standpoint of personality"¹⁹⁸. On this standard, passionate desire for the realization of goals, supreme indifference to evanescent material benefits, sterling self-confidence and courage to overcome obstacles, tolerance for the views and acts of others etc, are good, whereas ill-founded fears, undeserved possessions, disrespect for humanity, a false sense of dignity, malicious attitudes towards others are all bad. There being degrees of individuality, God is the most integrated individual. One who is nearest to him in this respect is thus the completes man. This nearness does not at all imply that man is finally absorbed in God; rather he absorbs God into himself. Even such a voluminous upheaval as the phenomenon of Universal Destruction preceding the Day of Judgement will not affect the individuality, uniqueness and calm of the well-integrated ego. The Qur'an says:

The Trumpet will (just) be sound, when all that are in the heavens and on earth wili swoon, except such as it will please God (to exempt)¹⁹⁹.

¹⁹⁸ Introduction to 'The Secrets of the Self'.

¹⁹⁹ Quran, 39: 69.

“Who can be the subject of this exception”, asks Iqbal,²⁰⁰ “but these in whom the ego has reached the very highest point of intensity? And the climax of this development is reached when the ego is able to retain full self-possession, even in the case of a direct contact with the all-embracing ego. As the Qur’an says of the Prophet’s vision of the Ultimate Ego: his eye turned not “aside, nor did it wander”.²⁰¹

Iqbal, in his poetic work, has described three stages towards the fullest realization of the integration of personality. The first is the stage of obedience to law. This is the level at which a person unquestioningly submits to, the order imposed by the shari’ah of Islam. This habit disciplines his being, instills in him the qualities of perseverance, patience and firmness against heavy odds and against all sorts of distraction, and deviation. The state of complete obedience to an externally imposed command, however, cannot persist for long. Doubts and apprehensions are bound to appear sooner or later—consciously or subconsciously—regarding the justifiability of these commands. This naturally impells the person to discover their rationale and attain complacency and satisfaction within. The individual now feels that the moral and religious orders have taken roots in his own being rather than in a ‘foreign’ agency. Kant very pointedly said that a principle of moral conduct is morally binding on me if and only if I can regard it as a law that I impose on myself. In a specifically religious context, Iqbal approvingly quotes the words of a Muslim mystic: ‘no understanding of the Holy Book is possible until it has actually revealed to the believer just as it was revealed to the Prophet’.²⁰² This generally speaking, is the stage of self-control. Consequent upon this comes the third and the highest stage, namely, Niabet-e-Ilahi. Attainment of internal harmony and cohesion and unswerving self-confidence ultimately equips the individual for the assimilation of Divine attributes and for sufficiently deserving the appellation of ‘Deputy of God on

²⁰⁰ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 118.

²⁰¹ Quran, 53: 17.

²⁰² The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 181:

Earth'. In the words of Iqbal himself: "the na'ib is the vicegerent of God on earth. He is the completest Ego, the goal of humanity, the same of life both in mind and body; in him the discord of our mental life becomes a harmony. The highest power is united in him with the highest knowledge. In his life thought and action, instinct and reason, become one. He is the last fruit of the tree of humanity, and all the trials of a painful evolution are justified because he is to come at the end. He is the real ruler of mankind; his kingdom is the kingdom of God on earth."²⁰³

To conclude, a word about the metaphysics of Iqbal which of course is also relevant to the destiny of man. The fact that according to Iqbal it is not man who is finally absorbed in God but rather God who is absorbed in man suggests that to all intents and purposes he is a theist. Introducing the English translation of *Asrar-e-Khudi* he sufficiently elucidates his position against pantheism on which he further elaborates in his 'Reconstruction' and specially in his lecture on *The Conception of God and the Meaning of Prayer.*' In this lecture he brings out the uncompromising individuality of God with reference to the Qur'anic surah *Ikhlas*. He further refers to the verse:

God is the light of the heavens and of the earth. His light is like a niche in which is a lamp —the lamp encased in a glass,—the glass, as it were, a star.²⁰⁴

This verse is sometimes understood, particularly by Western orientalist, to support a pantheistic view of the Ultimate Reality. "The opening sentence of the verse", Iqbal admits, does give "the impression of an escape from an individualistic conception of God. But when we follow the metaphor of light in the rest of the verse, it gives just the opposite impression. The development of the metaphor is meant rather to exclude the suggestion of a formless cosmic element by centralizing the light in a flame which is futher

²⁰³ Introduction to 'The Secrets of the Self.

²⁰⁴ Quran, 24: 35.

individualized by its encasement in a glass likened unto a well-defined star...The metaphor of light as applied to God therefore must...be taken to suggest the Absoluteness of God and not His Omnipresence which easily lends itself to a pantheistic interpretation”.²⁰⁵

However, besides this declared attitude, there are a number of implicit, though quite significant references in the writings of Iqbal which exhibit a tendency towards pantheism. For instance, he says:

(i) “From the Ultimate Ego only egos proceed”.²⁰⁶ (the word 'proceed' here suggests a sort of emanationism).

(ii) “The universe does not confront God as an ‘other’ existing per se... from the standpoint of the all-inclusive Ego there is no other’. In Him thought and deed, the act of knowing and the act of creating are identical”²⁰⁷.

And so on.

The above apparently ambivalent position of Iqbal is due to his almost equally strong allegiance to orthodoxy as well as to the mystico-philosophical tradition in Islam. Really, pantheism and theism do not refer to two diametrically opposed and mutually contradictory ontological truths in the usual sense of the term ‘ontology’. They are simply existential points of view. The difference between them can be understood analogically with reference to the difference between tariqat and shari’at or that between the inner and the outer aspects of religious awareness. In one of his letters Iqbal writes:

“A proper appreciation of the limits of the self is known as shari’at (the Islamic code of life) and to realize this code in the very depths of on’s being is tariqat (the mystic way to perfection). When God’s commands get so suffused in the self that the private affections and attachment cease to exist

²⁰⁵ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, pp. 64-65.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

and the only object of life for the self becomes fulfilment of God's will, the condition is described by some eminent mystics of Islam as fana (self-annihilation) and by others baqa' (self-preservation)..."²⁰⁸

Hence the controversy regarding whether Iqbal was a pantheist or a theist that has long been carried on by the scholars of Iqbal appear to be a little misconstrued. He may justifiably be both.

As we look more closely at the position of Iqbal, we find that he neither holds on to absolute pantheism in the sense of sheer identity of God with the universe nor does he subscribe to theism in the sense in which a layman would do such that he fails to conceive God as having a constant, living contact and a companionship with man: this contact being available to him only when invoked in petitionary prayers. Iqbal's characteristic view in this regard is that which has been known as 'pantheism' i.e. God includes the world and at the same time transcends it. Such a relation, for instance, exists between a human person, on the one hand, and his habits and character, on the other. Behaviour of the universe comprises the habits of God, according to Iqbal, and the evolution and growth of nature, in general, and of man, in particular, amounts to no less than the realization of the potentialities of Divine being himself.

²⁰⁸ Iqbal Namah, p. 202.

Translated into English by Syed Abdul Wahid, Iqbal—His Art and Thought, p. 235.