

# IQBAL'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Dr. KHURSHID ANWAR

The epistemology of Iqbal is in fact the epistemology of the Quran. Like the Qur'an, Iqbal makes full allowance for all kinds of experiences. Such as sense-perception, reason, intuition (Love), prophetic revelation... all these sources are various means to acquire knowledge. For Iqbal 'Knowledge' is not a deterministic nor limited concept which would have had only one or two sources. He regards knowledge as a great boon. He starts from sense-perception, passes through intellect arrives at his distinction, love. Thus we will categorize his theory of knowledge in terms of sense-perception, reason and Love. This last word he understands in its broad sense of religious experience, intuition and prophetic revelation.

He defines knowledge as "sense-perception elaborated by understanding".<sup>230</sup> In order to vindicate his claim he takes some quotations from the Qur'an, emphasizing the point that man is endowed with the faculty of naming things, (as the Quran says "O Adam inform them of the names") that is to say forming concepts of them is capturing them.

Thus the character of man's knowledge is conceptual and it is with the weapon of this conceptual knowledge that man approaches the observable aspects of reality.<sup>231</sup>

But what is this "observable aspect of reality" which, according to Iqbal only be approached through man's conceptual knowledge? It is the universe, it is "nature". After a reflective observation on the nature, man has, consciousness of what this nature symbolizes.

Iqbal further points out that the Qur'an sees signs of the ultimate reality in the sun, the moon, the lengthening of the shadows, the alternation of day and night, the variety of human colours and tongues...in fact in the life of nature as revealed to the sense-perception of man. And that the Muslim's duty is to reflect on these signs and not pass by them as if he is deaf and

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<sup>230</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, M. Iqbal p. 12.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13

blind.<sup>232</sup> On another place Iqbal says: ‘It is through thinking that our knowledge grows and thinking is determined by our sensuous experience. So when the nature of our senses undergoes a change, the world is changed for us. Rest, Motion, Quality and Quantity take a new significance’.<sup>233</sup>

Why was Iqbal so strongly concerned of the fact that knowledge is actually based on sense-perception. One reason could be that he was greatly shocked by Greek thought which had influenced the Muslim’s thinking for centuries and the impressions of which are still existing.

Referring to this fact Muhammad Iqbal asserts that “the cultures of Asia and, in fact of the whole ancient world failed because they approached Reality exclusively from within and moved from within outwards”.<sup>234</sup>

The first object of Iqbal’s condemnation was Plato who regarded imagination and fantasies as true while he disbelieved knowledge furnished by the natural instruments (like the eyes and the ears). Iqbal was also hostile to the teachings of Socrates, Mutazilites and other idealists who looked upon this world as of no use and value; Socrates’ inquiry restricted itself to the moral problems of mankind. To him the proper study of man was man and not the world of plants, insects and stars. How unlike the Quran, which sees in the humble bee a recipient of Divine inspiration and constantly calls upon the reader to observe the perpetual change of the winds, the alternation of day and night, the clouds, the starry heavens and the planets swimming through infinite space.<sup>235</sup>

Similarly Plato, considers sense-perception as incapable of giving real knowledge, it can only give mere opinion. He fashions and moulds his supreme Reality out of his ideas. For him only ideas give the true and infallible knowledge of the ultimate Reality.

Sense-perception is for him a mere illusion. Therefore Iqbal violently attacks Plato at various places in his works. He says that Plato despised sense-perception which in his view, yielded mere opinion and no real knowledge. How unlike the Quran which regards “hearing” and “sight” as the most valuable Divine gifts and declares them to be accountable to God

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<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 127-128

<sup>233</sup> *The New Rose Garden of Mystery and the book of Slaves.* By M. Hadi Hussain pb. M. Ashraf Lahore, 1969. P. 38.

<sup>234</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* by Iqbal pp. 14 -15

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.* p.14.

for their activity in this world”.<sup>236</sup> Iqbal named Plato one of the “Flock of Sheeps” who actually exploited the former Muslim students of the Quran who studied under the classical speculation and read the Quran in the light of Greek thought. Iqbal has given us a very vivid poem in his “Secrets of Self” and likewise warned us to beware of such a Flock of Sheep. It is necessary here to reproduce that poem in order to fully understand Iqbal’s thoughts about the visible aspects of reality. He maintains that:

“Plato the Prime ascetic and sage was one of that ancient flock of sheep, His Pegasus went astray in the darkness of idealism, and dropped its shoe amidst the rocks of actuality.

He was so fascinated by the invisible that he made hand, eye, and ear of no account. “To die”, said he “is the secret of life: The candle is glorified by being put out”.

He dominates our thinking, His cup sends us to sleep and takes the sensible world away from us.

He is a sheep in man’s clothing,

The soul of the Sufi bows to his authority. He soared with his intellect to the highest heaven

And called the world of phenomena a myth. Twas his work to dissolve the structure of Life And cut the bough of life’s fair tree asunder. The thought of Plato regarded loss as profit, His philosophy declared that being is not-being.

His nature drowsed and created a dream His mind’s eye created a mirage.

Since he was without any taste for action, His soul was enraptured by the non-existent.

He disbelieved in the material universe And became the creator of invisible Ideas. Sweet is world of phenomena to the living spirit:

Dear is the world of ideas to the dead spirit:

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid* p.4.

Its gazelles have no grace of movement,

Its partridges are denied the pleasure of walking daintily.  
Its dewdrops are unable to quiver,

Its birds have no breath in their breasts, Its seed does not desire to grow,

Its moths do not know how to flutter. Our recluse has no remedy but flight:

He could not endure the noise of this world. He set his heart on the glow of a quenched flame

And depicted a word steeped in opium. He spread his wings towards the sky

And never came down to his nest again. His phantasy is sunk in the jar of heaven:

I know not whether it is the dregs or the brick of the wine-jar.

The peoples were poisoned by his intoxication:  
He slumbered and took no delight in deeds<sup>237</sup>

Iqbal also attacked Ibn-i-Rushed and Al-Ghazzali because Ibn-i-Rushed defended Greek philosophy while Ghazzali attacked it. Both for Iqbal have trodden the same path as far as the avoidance of sense-perception is concerned.

Ibn-i-Rushed through his doctrine of the immortality of the active intellect, a doctrine which once influenced France and Italy and which is opposed to the view of Quran, has taken notice of the value and the destiny of the human ego. And thus for Iqbal "Ibn-i-Rushed lost sight of the ideas of Islam" which obscured man's vision of himself, his God and his world.<sup>238</sup> Similarly the Quran does not justify al-Ghazzali's philosophic scepticism. Al-Ghazzali was a reaction to the extreme rationalism. He was a great protagonist of intuition, mystic experience and religious experience. Iqbal has

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<sup>237</sup> *The Secrets of the Self*, translated by Reynold A. Nicholson, pp. 56-59

<sup>238</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* by Iqbal pp.4.

the following opinion of al-Ghazzali: “That Ghazzali finding no hope in analytic thought moved to mystic experience and there found an independent content for religion. In this way he succeeded in securing for religion the right to exist independently of science and metaphysics. But the revelation of the total infinite in mystic experience convinced him of the finitude and inconclusiveness of thought and drove him to draw a line of cleavage between thought and intuition. He failed to see that thought and intuition are organically related and that thought must necessarily stimulate finitude and inconclusiveness because of its alliance with serial time.

The idea that thought is essentially finite, and for this reason unable to capture the infinite, is based on a mistaken notion of the movement of thought in knowledge”.<sup>239</sup>

To give a better explanation of what he means by knowledge; he writes in a letter, “that I have generally used the word ‘knowledge’ in the sense of knowledge based on the senses. It gives man power which should be subordinated to religion. If it is not subordinated to religion it is a satanic force. This knowledge is the first step to true knowledge as I have pointed out in ‘Javid Noma’. The knowledge of truth is gained first through the senses and then through direct realization. Its ultimate stages cannot be encompassed within consciousness.

Knowledge which cannot be circumscribed within consciousness and which is the final stage of truth, is also called love or intuition<sup>240</sup> He emphasizes the sense perception as the first source of knowledge through which he sees the ultimate Reality. For him the reality shows itself in its own appearances and “man in his obstructing environment cannot afford to ignore the visible”.<sup>241</sup> He awakes the people from their slumbers and asks them to get up and open their eyes and not to consider this necessitated world as mean.

Because “This world of colour and fragrance is worthy of contemplation. And in this green valley there are so many flowers awaiting

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>240</sup> *Iqbal's Educational Philosophy*. M. Ashraf Lahore By K.G. SAIYIDAIN, 8th edition. 1977 pp. 88-89.

<sup>241</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal pp.14.

thy recreation”.<sup>242</sup> He replies to those who regard this world as of no value and use, that the spirit and the matter are not opposed entities, and that this world for him is not a torture hall where an elementally wicked humanity is imprisoned for an original act of sin”.<sup>243</sup> For him the ultimate Reality is spiritual and its life is wholly consisted in its temporal activity”. The spirit finds its opportunities in the natural, the material and secular... There is no such thing as a profane world. All this immensity of matter constitutes a scope for the self- realization of spirit. All is holy ground”.<sup>244</sup> All this means that Iqbal strongly defends his views about the visible and concrete reality. He does not agree with the opinion that only man’s speculative and contemplative spirit will lead to the extent of the ultimate reality. And he does not encourage man’s (withdrawal) from the world of matter, since it is with its temporal flux and shifting phenomena, organically related to the ultimate reality”.

There is no possibility of thought emerging from concrete experience. On the contrary, one should take one’s start from here because it is the intellectual seizure of and power over the concrete that makes it possible for the intellect of man to pass beyond the concrete.<sup>245</sup> For he who does not see these signs in this life, will remain blind to the realities of the life to come. They are the manifestations of Divine effulgence and reflective observation leads into their ultimate nature and reveals the secret of Divine Reality”.<sup>246</sup> For him the “knowledge of nature is the knowledge of God’s behaviour”.<sup>247</sup> Iqbal believes in sense-perception, which he regards as the normal level of experience and he sees the ultimate Reality through sense-perception. Still he believes that the ultimate Reality is lying outside the normal level of experience, inaccessible to sense perception and pure reason. And for him the only question is whether the normal level is capable of yielding knowledge. Certainly not because the normal level (sense-perception and intellect) is not capable of approaching ultimate Reality parse.

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<sup>242</sup> *Rubaiyat of Iqbal*. by A.R. Tariq. Pb. Sh. Ghulam Ali & sons, Lahore 1973 p. 76.

<sup>243</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p 85.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*. p. 155.

<sup>245</sup> *The place of God, Man and Universe in the Philosophic System of Iqbal*: by DR. JAMILA KHATOON PP. 5.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid* p.5.

<sup>247</sup> *The Reconstruction*, p. 57.

For Iqbal “intellect merely lights the way but it is not itself a goal nor a destination”<sup>248</sup>. Kant is supposed to have ruined the importance and necessity of Pure Reason. Therefore he is still influential in the history of philosophy “as God’s greatest gift to his country”.<sup>249</sup> Iqbal says about Kant that “His Critique of Pure reason revealed the limitations of human reason and reduced the whole work of the rationalists to a heap of ruins”<sup>250</sup> But the approach of Kant to pure reason was based on his failure to see that thought in the very act of knowledge passes beyond its own finitude. The finitudes of nature are reciprocally exclusive not so the finitude of thought which is in its essential nature, incapable of limitation and cannot remain imprisoned in the narrow circuit of its own individuality.

In the wide world beyond itself nothing is alien to it. It is in its progressive participation in the life of the apparently alien that thought demolishes the walls of its finitude and enjoys a potential infinitude. Its movement becomes possible only because of the implicit presence in its finite individuality of the infinite, which keeps alive within it the flame of aspiration and sustains it in its endless pursuit. It is a mistake to regard thought as inconclusive, for it too in its way is a greeting of the finite with the Infinite”<sup>251</sup> The real problem for Iqbal was that he wanted to see religion garbed in the attire of rationalism.

In this regard he got some help from Whitehead an English philosopher and mathematician, who once said that “The ages of faith are the ages of rationalism”<sup>252</sup>. Iqbal believes that the attempt of doing so is not new, it has begun with the Prophet of Islam. The Prophet of Islam, in a broad sense, was himself the foundation of rational thinking in religion (Islam). Iqbal claims that “The search for rational foundation in Islam may be regarded to have begun with the Prophet himself. His constant prayer was: “God! grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things”<sup>253</sup>.

Let us not overlook the following sentence of Iqbal that “The birth of Islam is the birth of inductive intellect”<sup>254</sup>.

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<sup>248</sup> *Rubaiyat of Iqbal*. Rendered by A.R. TARIQ pb. Sh. Ghulam All & sons, 1973 P. 201.

<sup>249</sup> *The Reconstruction* PP. 5.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid* p. 5.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid* Pr. 6-7.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid* p. 2.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid* p. 3.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid*. P. 126.

As we have already mentioned Iqbal's epistemology is constructed on the pattern of Quranic epistemology, in which sense-perception and reason are the imitations to the acquisition of knowledge. These two sources are insufficient as far as the knowledge of the ultimate Reality is concerned. As a consequence they need to be completed by another source of knowledge, on which Iqbal, following the Quran, puts most emphasis. He identifies this source of knowledge with love (ISHQ) and intuition and religious experience. For him love, intuition, religious experience and prophetic revelation are just the same in their very nature. This kind of knowledge is direct, immediate and will unveil to him new spheres of illumination, wherein vistas of reality, comprehending Divine presence itself. In contrast, the knowledge yielded by intellect is fragmentary because it is involved in the labyrinth of space and time.

The Knowledge through intuition is not imparted partially and indirectly.

It is grounded in the deeper and higher self of man. "It is incorporeal and eternal and leads directly to the incorporeal and the eternal"<sup>255</sup>

The main characteristics of the mystic experience are the following:

1) The mystic experience is immediate experience. This kind of experience, Iqbal says, does not differ from other levels of human experience which supply data for knowledge. It gives the direct apprehension of ultimate Reality. Mystic experience or love or intuition apprehends the ultimate Reality as the sense-perception perceives the sensible reality. As regions of normal experience are subject to interpretation of sense-data for knowledge of the external world, so the region of mystic experience is subject to interpretation for our knowledge of God. The immediacy of mystic experience simply means that we know God just as we know other objects.

"God is not a mathematical entity nor a system of concepts mutually related to one another and having no reference to experience."<sup>256</sup>

2) The mystic experience is an unanalysable whole. This is a sort of giving reality an indivisible organic unity. As in normal experience innumerable data of experience fall into a single experience and selected data which fall into the order of space and time, will be referred to a certain

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<sup>255</sup> *The place of God man, and universe in the Philosophic system of Iqbal.* p. 9.

<sup>256</sup> *The Reconstruction,* p. 18.



sensible reality. But in mystic state, Iqbal says “that this kind of analysis of stupendous experience is not possible”. William James thinks the the mystic experience is some kind of mysterious faculty and having discontinuance with the normal consciousness. It is the same reality operating on us. It is unique, unanalysable and indivisible.

The ordinary rational consciousness, in view of our practical need of adaptation to our environment takes that reality piecemeal, selecting successively isolated sets of stimuli for response. The mystic state brings us into contact with the total passage of reality in which all the diverse stimuli merge into one another and form a single unanalysable unity in which the ordinary distinction of subject and object does not exist”.<sup>257</sup>

3) The ultimate Reality is transcending, encompassing the whole universe. It is the unique other self or what Iqbal regards as the Ultimate Ego. And the mystic state is the moment of intimate association with this ultimate Reality or unique other self. This mystic state, Iqbal says, is highly objective. It is the unique other self transcending and encompassing the private personality of the finite individual.

Our experience of other minds is immediate and direct.<sup>258</sup>

4) Iqbal says that mystic experience cannot be communicated. Mystic experience is feeling rather than thought. The content of mystic or religious consciousness can be communicated to others in the form of propositions, but the content it self cannot be transmitted.

This kind of experience has two aspects a non-temporal and a temporal one. The non-temporal is feeling and the temporal is idea. Feeling is outward-pushing, as idea is outward reporting and no feeling is so blind as to have no idea of its own object. Every direction has some objective.

A feeling has some direction as an activity does, therefore feeling cannot be regarded without a direction.<sup>259</sup>

5) Iqbal says that this mystic experience, though it is intimately associated with the eternal, cannot break the relation with serial time.

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 18-19.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid* pp. 20-21.

Mystic state is related to the normal experience. And this is why Iqbal maintains that the “Mystic’s condemnation of intellect as an organ of knowledge does not really find any justification in the history or religion”<sup>260</sup>.

When this mystic experience is finished, it leaves a sense of authority behind it. This means that experience is experienced during a certain period. Though this period is not fixed (concerning its where and when). Once happened will “be fraught with infinite meaning for mankind”.<sup>261</sup>

Love or intuition means knowledge through the heart, wherein we have change but not success,- pure duration but not serial time. This experience which he also calls religious experience, is ranked among the other existing normal levels of experience. Iqbal says: “the facts of religious experience are facts among facts of human experience and in the capacity of yielding knowledge by interpretation one fact is as good as another”.<sup>262</sup>

What is a heart which is supposed to be the seat of love or religious experience? If love comes from the heart and intellect from the mind then we are authorized to raise a question: “What is the difference between heart and mind?”

Until now, we have heard of a dualism between mind and body but not of a battle between mind, body and heart. Still the question asked above suggests this three dimensional man. Actually heart and mind are the same; heart is the seat of loving and hating, thinking and doubting, cognition and feeling. For Bergson intuition (Love) is only a higher kind of intellect.<sup>263</sup> Al-Ghazzali, a mystical philosopher, defines heart in the following words “The first step to knowledge is to know that thou art composed of outward shape called body and the inward entity called the heart or soul. By heart I do not mean that piece of flesh situated in the left of our bodies, but that which uses all the other faculties as its instrument and servant. In truth, it does not belong to the visible world but to the invisible and has come into this world as a traveler visits a foreign country for the sake of merchandise and will

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<sup>260</sup> *Ibid* p. 22.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid* p. 23.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid* p. 16.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid* p. 3

presently return to his native land, It is the knowledge of this entity and its attributes which is the key to the knowledge of God”.<sup>264</sup>

Iqbal has put forward views about the meaning of the heart not different from those of Ghazzali or the Quran. For him (Iqbal) “The heart is a kind of inner intuition or insight which in the beautiful words of Rumi (a Persian mystic poet whom Iqbal considers his spiritual leader), feeds on the rays of the sun and brings us into contact with aspects of reality other than those open to sense-perception. It is, according to the Quran, something which “Sees” and its reports, if properly interpreted, are never false. We must not however, regard it as a mysterious special faculty: it is rather 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>265</sup>

The question is, why this kind of experience is not generally acknowledged by everybody in contrast to sense-perception for instance which is open to everybody. Why do people still consider it a mysterious kind of faculty? The answer to these questions is based on the fact that if all knowledge had come to heart in this easy way, the idea of seeking by reason would have gone to perdition. There would have been no empirical knowledge, no quest for the comprehension of this universe.

Everything derives from human seeking and struggle. Everything is based on the human desires. When you desire something you start seeking for it and your desiring and seeking for that something brings you in an intimation with it. As Iqbal asserts:

“Life is preserved by purpose  
Because of the goal its caravan bell tinkles. Life is latent in seeking,

Its origin is hidden in desire.  
Keep desire alive in thy heart,  
Lest the little dust become a tomb.  
Desire is the soul of this world of hue and scent.

The nature of everything is a store house of desire.

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<sup>264</sup> *Glimpse of Iqbal's Mind and Thought*, by H.H. Bilgrami 1966. p.50-55.

<sup>265</sup> *The Reconstruction*, pp. 15-16.

Desire sets the heart dancing in the breast.

And by its glow the breast is made bright as a mirror.

It gives to earth the power of soaring.

It is a Khidr to the Moses of perception.

From the flame of desire the heart takes life,

And when it takes life, all dies that is not true.

Then it refrains from forming desires,

Its pinion breaks and it cannot soar.

Desire keeps the self in perceptual uproar. It is a restless wave of the self's sea".<sup>266</sup>

The whole philosophy of Iqbal rests on the foundation of love. His work, especially his poetry, is the exhortation of love. And for him love is the ultimate, clear and distinct source of knowledge. He has shown to us that the Ego or self can be strengthened by the force of love. By love an ego can be made more lasting, more living, more burning and more glowing. Whatever disease exists in the mind of human beings, love can heal this sickness very easily and remove all the doubts there of. Iqbal defines love by asking:

“What is love? It is to hurl unity, At your heart like a thunderbolt and then to hurl your self at every obstacle”.<sup>267</sup>

And again some where else he defines it as follows:

“What is love? It is journeying without a break, transcending limits, ending ends. Love knows no ending, no finality; Its morning has no evening in its wake.

Its path like wisdom's has its turns and bends.

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<sup>266</sup> *The secret of the self*. pp. 23-24.

<sup>267</sup> *The New Rose Garden of mystery and the book of slaves* as mentioned above, p. 60.

But it goes forward instantaneously unerring”.<sup>268</sup>

Iqbal has at many places in his works compared love to reason. He says for instance:<sup>269</sup>

“A true Believer exists by “Love” and Love exists by his being  
Whatever is “impossible” for us. Is quite possible for “Love”  
“The only Substance with Reason Is “Fear” and “Doubt”.  
But a firm Faith and Determination Are indispensable to “Love”

“Reason says: “O Man

Be always happy.

And enjoy your Life to its Less

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<sup>268</sup> *The New Rose Garden of Mystery and the Book of Slaves* Trans. By M. Hadi Hussain, Pb. M. Ashraf, Lahore, 1969.

<sup>269</sup> *Secrets of collective life*, pp. 69-71.

But Love says:

Be obedient to God.

And then enjoy a perfect Freedom Reason's a knot-resolving slave, Faith  
mid convention's lard to grave, For in the breast there beats a heart, The  
unseen target of love's dart".<sup>270</sup>

Therefore this does not mean that Iqbal has fully demolished or belittled  
the value of reason.

Though he considers reason alone a satanic force which leads humanity  
astray still is a divine light if wedded with love. So reason and love together  
create a new world. This idea of Iqbal can be seen in the following verses:

“For westerner doth reason furnish all accoutrement of life and for the  
East love is the key of mystery.

Love-led can reason claim the lord and reason-lit love strikes from roots.

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<sup>270</sup> *Persian Psalms*. A J ARBERRY. Pb. M. Ashraf 1961, 14.

When integrated, these two, draw the pattern of a different World.

Let love and reason intermixed be to chart a world all new”.<sup>271</sup>

“If it be diversified from love.

Then knowledge is but satan’s progeny;

But if it blends with love, it joins the ranks of high celestial spirits. Love-bereft

All knowledge is but cold as death, the shaft of intellect its target fails to reach.

But let love’s sight restore a vision to one who is blind and so in darkness gropes;

And make a Hayder of this Bu-lahab”.

Both are in quest of the Ultimate Reality. Both are indispensable to each other as he indicates in his verse:

“Both are in quest of one abode

And both would lead upon the Road.

Reason tries every strategem,

But love pulls gently by the hem”.<sup>272</sup>

The same idea can be found in the following lines,<sup>273</sup>

“(both intuition and reason) are in need of each other for mutual rejuvenation. Both seek vision of the same Reality which reveals itself to them in accordance with their function in life”.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> *Pilgrimage of Eternity* by Sheikh Mehmud Ahmad. 1961. p. 54.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66.

<sup>273</sup> *Persian psalms.* P. 14.

<sup>274</sup> *The Reconstruction.* P. 3.