

IQBAL AND MYSTICISM

DR. MUHAMMAD AJMAL

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F. Schuon has maintained that each Semitic religion has a dominant motif. The dominant motif in Judaism is Fear. The dominant motif in Christianity is Love. The dominant motif in Islam is Knowledge. This does not mean that all these motifs are not present in each of these religions. One motif is dominant. The other two have secondary importance.

Iqbal's main concern in his Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam is the adaptation of knowledge to Islam. According to Iqbal, there are three main sources of knowledge:

1. History,
2. Nature, and
3. Self.

When Iqbal talks about History, he does not mean stories of exploit of kings and conquerors and the feelings and thoughts of saints, poets and thinkers, but his main pre-occupation is the historical process.

When he talks about Nature, he not only discusses sense-perception which provides us with the raw material of scientific knowledge, but also Nature as a living force.

The third source of knowledge is the human personality. Iqbal thinks that in Muslim history only the Sufis studied the human personality in its depth.

To Iqbal goes the credit of restoring the self-respect and self-regard of Muslims in the sub-continent. Colonialism had induced a sense of inadequacy and self-devaluation among the people. But Iqbal by expounding the philosophy of Ego emphasized the central importance of the Ego and tried especially through his great poetic genius, to make them realize that there were in-finite latent powers in the Ego. They only need to be explored, discovered and realized. In order to attain the full-flowering of the Ego, one has to develop self-restraint, vigilance, perseverance, decisiveness and discipline. Nothing is beyond the reach of the Ego, even an encounter with God, where the finite greets the infinite.

This is a life-affirming and life-giving philosophy. Indeed it gives supreme value to man who, according to Foucault, "is an invention of the 19th century." Man, according to Iqbal, can elevate his ego to an extent that God Himself can ask man about the nature and direction of his destiny. He goes so far as to address man as "the seed, the field, and the harvest." Man is the root, the soil and the fruit. But he himself is the user. The one who benefits from the fruit.

In many poems he tried to obviate the sense of devaluation among the colonised peoples. It is true that the awareness of the people had been mangled and severely damaged by the colonisers. Iqbal tried to heal the wounds of the Muslims who had not only lost a Kingdom but were also groping for an awareness of self-identity. What havoc this sense of self-devaluation, induced by the colonial rule, can play has been portrayed by Frantz Fanon in his Wretched of the Earth in a masterly fashion.

The first balm applied to those wounds was to kindle memories of their own history, their own tradition, their own culture. Iqbal thus gave a spiritual "space" to the Indian

Muslims, and gave them boundaries, a home which, by definition, is a place where one can daydream, have a reverie. Thus he gave them space – which they could cultivate, cherish and fertilize -- in which they could live and breathe. Of course he gave them the idea of space but also provided them with an image of that space.

The Image of Pakistan

The Ego needed this kind of elevation. One expression of this elevation was the glorification of the past, the kings, the conquerors, saints and sufis, scholars and scientists.

This glorification was meant to awaken the Muslims to an awareness of the present realities and to adapt themselves to the, new developments in science and technology. Glorification of the Ego through a glorification of the past has its dangers. In a considerable portion of our past we encounter a very strong streak of patriarchal and too masculine a trend of thinking in which passion for mastery and conquest is evident: The opposite of this trend is also found in the liberal and humanistic philosophy of sufis, saints and poets. If one strengthens the ego on this pattern, the ego can easily develop an inflated image of godlikeness. It can drive us to conquer, manipulate, subdue and oppress others. It does not see with Intelligence. It analyses, dissects and derives a diabolical delight in pulling things apart. It does not hesitate to desacrilise every thing. It does not create a “temenos” because temenos means escape, refuge and sometimes surrender to the higher realities. Surrender for an ego-inflated person, institution or a nation is an indication of weakness. Surrender even to God hurts their ego.

Desacrilization implies a total denuding of the nature of Beauty. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon his soul) has said; “The whole world is a mosque.” In his lecture on “The meaning of Prayer” Iqbal thinks that when a scientist observes nature, he is praying i.e. he has an attitude of reverence towards nature. How far is it true of all scientists or all science we do not know.

Again in پیام مشرق he says:

ہوائے علم تا اُفتد بدامت
یقین کم کُن گرفتار شکے باش
عمل خوابی یقین را پختہ تر کُن
یکے بین و یکے جو ویکے باش

(1)

Here is to know is not to pray. There in order to know one must involve oneself in doubt and decrease the intensity of faith.

Iqbal admired the development of modern science, but could not swallow the Cartesian method of doubt. He, therefore, denounces reason or thought, quite often.

In his poetry one encounters quite often a serious devaluation of thought – that it can reach nowhere. Similar denunciations are found among other Sufis – for instance M. Ashraf Ali Thanvi, in his Basair-ud-Dawair, thinks that all thinking is circular – it begins where it ends and again reaches the same end and so the vicious circle goes on.

But at other times one notices in Iqbal the vital importance of thought and thinking. For example, in Secrets of the Self, he relates a story about Sheikh Ali Hujveri and the young man from Mery:

‘I will tell a story of his perfection and enclose a whole rose-bed in a single bud.
A young man, Cypress-tall,
Came from the town of Mery to Lahore.
He went to see the venerable saint,
That the sun might dispel his darkness.

“I am hemmed in” he said, “by foes;
I am as a glass in the midst of stones.
Do thou teach me, O sirs of heavenly rank,
How to lead my life amongst enemies!”

“The wise Director, in whose nature
Love had allied beauty with Majesty,
Answered: “Thou art unread in Life’s lore,
Careless of its end and its beginning.
Be without fear of others!
Thou art a sleeping force: awake!
When the stone thought itself to be glass,
It became glass and got into the way of breaking,
If the traveler thinks weak,
He delivers his soul unto the brigand.
How long wilt thou regard thyself as water and clay?
Create from the clay a flaming Sinai!
Why be angry with mighty men?
Why complain of enemies?
I will declare the truth: thine enemy is thy friend;
His existence crowns thee with glory.
Whosoever knows the states of the Self
Considers a powerful enemy to be a blessing from God.
To the seed of Man the enemy is as a rain-cloud.
He awakens its potentialities.

If thy spirit be strong, the stones in thy way are as water: What racks the torrent of the ups and downs of the road? The sword of resolution is whetted by the stones in the way and put to proof by traversing stage after stage.

What is the use of eating and sleeping like a beast?
What is the use of being, unless thou have strength in thyself?
When thou mak’st thyself strong with Self,
Thou wilt destroy the world at thy pleasure.

If thou wouldst pass away, become free of Self; If thou wouldst live, become full of Self! What is death? To become oblivious of Self.

Why imagine that it is the parting of soul and body? Abide in Self, like Joseph!
Advance from captivity to empire!
Think of Self and be a man of action
Be a man of God, bear mysteries within! “2

چون شود اندیشه قومه خراب
ناسره گردد بدستش سیم ناب

میرد اندر سینه اش قلب سلیم
درنگاه او کج آید مستقیم

بر کراں از حرب و ضرب کائنات
چشم او اندر سکون ببند حیات

موج از دریاش کم گردد بلند
گوهر او چون خزف نا ارجمند

پس	نخستین	بایدش	تطهیر	فکر	
بعد	ازاں	آسان	شود	تعمیر	فکر

(3)

The story emphasizes two important points about human motivation. First is that thinking determines the nature and conduct of your personality. He says: If you think, that you are weak, you will become weak, if you think that you are strong and powerful you will be strong and powerful. If you seriously ascribe any moral quality to your ego, and think about it persistently you are bound to develop that quality. He maintains a similar position in his other poems such as 'پس چه باید کرد' in which he ascribes the spiritual and material degeneration of the people of the East to their confused and timid thinking.

The second important point is that it is thinking which determines the nature of your emotions. As you think so will you feel, and not the converse that as you feel, so shall you think.

Thinking involves concepts. Without conceptual thinking, science, philosophy, in fact, no academic discipline, except perhaps the fine arts, is possible. All Sufis denounce thinking in concepts when it is a question of being close to God. In fact they think that concepts are a veil which conceals the absolute from us. Unless you dissolve the concepts into experience, you cannot reach the station of closeness to God.

When thoughts are expressed in images, poetic images, mythological images, then one experiences the thoughts of the heart. The heart قلب which can exercise himmah, and become capable of perceiving spiritual realities.

It seems to me that Iqbal attaches considerable value to thinking but he cannot outgrow the Bergsonian ternary of instinct, intellect and intuition. The second category the intellect has to be realized fully before you reach the station of intuition, or love. Intellect thus becomes the means to the stage of intuition or love. This is not the position of Sufis. They think that you develop love by constant invocation of the Supreme Name, reciting litanies, chanting hymns, and prayers. Intellect does not seem to relish prayers, and stronger the ego, the greater is the resistance to prayer.

Iqbal and Sufism

While reading, Iqbal one gets the general impression that his attitude towards sufism was ambivalent. At one time he seems to condemn sufism and the sufi institutions, but at other times he seems to be a devotee of sufism – regarding it as the sole way out of that desperate spiritual state which Rene Guenon called "Dispersion into multiplicity." We have to find out exactly what he consistently condemns and what he admires or attaches value to in the sufi doctrines.

It might be a healthier approach to the problem if I start with the consideration of Qalb' or heart. According to the Chishti Saint, Hazrat Nizamud-Din Aulia, heart is the abode of Allah. The point of beginning with this concept is that heart or love plays a central role in Iqbal's philosophy. Secondly in modern times heart has become the organ which is most in danger. Harvey's heart has an inherent dichotomy – right and left – and in modern times this cleavage has caused an alarming increase in the diseases of the heart. Heart has

become the killer, a palpitator, a robber of health and poise, a disturber of sleep and an organ which mysteriously fails. It is not this heart that Iqbal and sufism regard as the abode of Allah.

One function of Qalb or heart is that it is capable of perceiving the inner being of reality. It does so by developing himmah, courage to break the conventional patterns of perception. Himmah develops when one dares to imagine, the highest stage of imagination is what Ibn-i-Arabi calls creative imagination. There is a valid distinction between true and false imagination.

Day dreams, reveries, idle fantasies, etc. are all instances of false imagination. True imagination is an instrument of perception, with which you perceive inner most being of Reality. In Jared Nama, Iqbal tries to answer two questions: What is Being? and what is good? Are you alive, or dead, or dying? For an answer to this question one must seek three witnesses:

The first witness is Consciousness of self, to see ourselves by one's own light, the second witness is other people's consciousness by whose light you see yourself. This other or others is vague. But it appears that Iqbal meant by other, one's spiritual mentors – not the people around you. Third witness is the consciousness of the Essence, of God, seeing oneself by the light of this Essence. If you do not shake and tremble and collapse, in front of this light, you will reach eternity and self-sustenance. This is the abode of yourself. This is real life. Life means seeing the essence unveiled. Momin, the man of God is not satisfied with attributes. For Mustafa insisted on Sight.

Sight however means a longing for a witness who may testify thyself.

After giving the description of the development of spirituality, he writes a few verses which seem to contradict this description. He says: Thou seest the Lord through self and self through Him. Neither more nor less thou seest of God than that. Again in Piyam-i-Mashriq, he says:

“If you seek God, you will see nothing but yourself. If you seek yourself, you will find nothing but Him.”⁴

The contradiction is that in first stage of development, one sees oneself by one's own light. The point is that one cannot see oneself except by the light of God. This is also the Sufi position. It is only through Mujahida that one can see God by looking into oneself, it is through introversion that Reality is revealed to you – we may take a term from siberer and call it intro-determination. Introversion can be natural state, but intro-determination implies that one is determined to look within, to confront the witnesses the barrenness and the desert. This desert can only be converted into a perfumed garden if our efforts develop a response from barkah, the divine grace.

What does Iqbal mean when he says that the first stage is when one sees oneself by one's own light, surely he is talking about ego. Iqbal- never makes a distinction between the ego and the self. The ego has its own light but it is different from the divine light. Very few people see the divine light without first receiving an injury to the ego. After the “I” is wounded. they start looking for the spirit generally under the guidance of a master – or mentor – there is also a mystic saying “one who is not injured, does not know what is to be healed.” The fall of man contains the provision of his redemption. Iqbal himself has his master, Maulana Rumi, but he is a turbulent seeker, he makes nimble transitions from one master to the other.

It has become fashionable especially in the third world to label all spirituality as an escape. And Iqbal sometimes supports this view. It is very seldom specified; escape from what to what. It is generally said, it is an escape from reality, which reality? Surely they mean

escape from external reality – socio-economic, political conditions etc. But we seldom realize; that a total pre-occupation with socio-economic reality might be an escape from the reality within, which might result in an escape from all intrinsic values, – Justice, Truth, Beauty and Love. Which escape is more rewarding? It is a difficult question.

Surely there is nothing intrinsically wrong in escape. You sense the presence of a dangerous animal in the jungle, it would be wise to flee and take to one's heels, if possible not to hold back.

Almost the first sentence in the prayer when we start praying is that we seek refuge with Allah from the accursed Satan. Marco Pallis writing in his fascinating book *Peaks and Lamas*, states that he once asked the most venerable Lama in one of the monasteries in Tibet, "What is the essence of Buddhism?" The Lama gave a laconic reply "Refuge". F. B. Skinner in a thought-provoking essay called "Flight from Laboratory", in which he contends that brilliant people succumb to the blandishments of popular acclaim when they desert laboratories, and start doing social service and social welfare work. He criticizes Albert Schweitzer that he involved himself with social reform and wasted his talents which if they were expressed in a laboratory might have produced something which is beneficial to the entire humanity. But Skinner forgets that just as there are some people who flee from laboratories, there are others who flee into laboratories. They are so frightened of having contact with real people that they seek refuge in the closed walls of a laboratory. Sometimes thinking may be an escape from feeling.

Thought is one of the points on which Iqbal always dwells on with eloquence but with a considerable degree of ambivalence. Quite early in his lecture on "Knowledge and Religious Experience" he maintains that in its deeper movement unfolding thought is capable of reaching an immanent infinite in whose self unfolding movement the various finite concepts are merely moments. Later, he elevates the capacity of thinking to a still higher level, he says: "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 it as inconclusive for it too, in its own way, in a greeting of the finite with the infinite"⁵.

Iqbal speaks about the unity of human consciousness. By unity, I think, he means the inter-relatedness of mental events. My toothache is related to my frustrations and anxiety, that is, both belong to the same organic whole. My toothache cannot in the same way be related to another person's anxiety, – although his anxiety may be about my toothache. Iqbal says:

"Devotional Sufism alone tried to understand the meaning of the unity of human experience which the Quran declares to be one of the three sources of knowledge,⁶

"In the higher Sufis of Islam unitive experience is not the finite ego effacing its own identity, by some sort of absorption into the infinite ego' it is rather the infinite passing into the loving embrace of the finite, as Rumi says:

علم حق در علم صوفی گم شود
ایں سخن کے باور مردم شود

Divine knowledge is lost in the knowledge of the saint. How is it possible for people to believe in such a thing?"⁷

What is the difference between the finite being absorbed in the infinite, and the infinite flowing into the finite – or the infinite embracing the finite? How does the latter unity differ from the unity attained in the former case? Is it a difference between "consciousness and Ecstasy" – is it that, in the former case, the general attitude of the person concerned is that

of lassitude and passive fatalism and in the latter case it is dynamism vigilance and initiative. Iqbal demands of sufism, a revolutionary outlook, which actively fights the evils of the world, take up arms in defence of the oppressed and wipes out the sense of self-devaluation from their souls. Self respect and self regard and intrinsic values for him, and he does not like to see a human being bow before anyone but God. It is this picture of combativeness against – oppression, of keeping how to become aware of his dignity, which distinguish Iqbal from other Sufi thinkers.

Iqbal endorses Rumi when he says:

مصلحت در دین عیسے غار دکوہ
مصلحت در دین ما جنگ و شکوہ
(8)

The significant word is that is a strategy, and not the essence. The strategy in Islam is war and glory. The strategy in Christianity is caves and mountains.

Strategies differ in two religions, but not their essence. The essence is the same – both are manifestations of the Divine, revelations from the divine fountain head.

The interesting point is that sometimes Iqbal also glorifies the cave and the mountain. In a lovely poem he has a verse which says:

حسن بے پروا کو اپنی بے نقابی کے لیے
ہوں اگر شہروں سے بن پیار سے تو شہر اچھے کہ بن
(9)

If the independent Beauty (God) likes to reveal itself in deserts, which is better, city or a desert?

The words which invite us to think are a greeting of the finite with the Infinite. Is it a one-sided greeting and or is it mutual? Does the finite only greet or does the Infinite respond, But since the Infinite is potentially present in the finite thought it becomes a greeting of the Infinite with the Infinite, greeting of the potential with the actual.

One wonders here that Iqbal, who consistently devalues thinking comparing it with intuition and Love in his poetry, what kind of thought is he talking about. Is he talking about the thought of the heart, when thought is not the Harvey's heart which in the words of James Hillman is a killer? Or is it the Qalb, the heart which is abode of God. When Qalb is moved by the Himmah, it expresses itself in thought which perceives the imaginal and not the imaginary. It is the creative act of the Qalb or thought. It is certainly not the discursive thinking, or retrocession of the mind, and it certainly does not express itself in concepts. It expresses itself in images which may later be embodied in concepts for purposes of logical statements,

Even in his poetry Iqbal assigns considerable value to thinking. He regards thinking as an agent of internal change, as a trans-former of personality – almost like stoics and in our own times like Albert Ellis, or Sheikh Ali Hujviri and the young man from Merv, and the opening lines of

پس چہ باید کرداے اقوام شرق

Throughout his poetry, however, he eulogizes “Love” Love as “the great healer of all ailments.” His eloquence is unsurpassed when he contemplates his “heart”.

“O’ My heart, O my heart, my ocean, my ship, my harbor, did you drop on my dust like dew? Did you reveal yourself like a blossom on my clay”? Love; when it fills a heart must lead to “the sacrifice of the superior function.” Without this sacrifice nothing is achieved. I will cite here Iqbal understands of some of Rumi’s Verses:

The Sufis book is not composed of ink and letters, it is not but a heart white as snow.”

The scholars' possession is pen-marks. What is the Sufis' possession? – Footmarks.

The Sufi stalks the game like a hunter, he sees the musk-deers' track and follows the footprints.

For some while the track of the deer is the proper clue for him, but afterwards it is the musk gland that is his guide.

To get to the stage guided by the musk gland is better than a hundred stages of following the track and roaming about.”

Iqbal explains the verses in his own way:

“The scientific observer of Nature is a kind of mystic seeker in the act of prayer. Although at present he follows only the footprints of the deer... his thirst for knowledge is eventually sure to lead him to footprints of the deer.

The inability to sacrifice one's superior function has been very well described by `Attar' in Mantiq-ut-tair.

“The nightingale cannot leave for the quest of Seemurgh, be-cause it is attached to the rose too much. The duck cannot leave water, because it is addicted to water. The hawk cannot leave its prey.” These are examples of not being able to sacrifice the superior function. The concept of found in Iqbal emphasizes the same concept. But somehow Iqbal did not formulate the concept of sacrifice of superior function for spiritual growth, clearly. There is a Sufi saying:

گر	راه	بر	تست	عادت	خویش
مردود	و	منافق	نه	درویش	

The explanation of Rumi's verses does not seem to be in consonance with the general trend of Rumi's thought, or for that matter, Sufi thought. A scholar follows the footmarks by his thinking. According to Rumi, one who follows the footmarks – does so endlessly and wanders about. The transition is from the observation of the footmarks to the perception of the musk in the deer's track. This change of perceptual mode is what we can call “sacrifice of the superior function;” The scholars' approach is based upon the superiority of the thinking function. Rumi contends that the superior function has to be sacrificed so that other functions, which are consciously regarded as “inferior”, are also awakened to enrich the life of the spirit, without this sacrifice, nothing can be achieved. It is this emphasis on sacrifice which is present as conversion of feelings into their opposites.

There is another ambivalence which projects itself into Iqbal' thought. Talking about Sheikh Ahmad of Sirhind, he quotes a passage from him which delineates stations of the Qalb (The Heart). After mentioning the first station, he goes on to say: Beyond this there are other stations known as Ruh, Sir Khafi and Akhfa; each of these stations, which together constitute what is technically called Alam-i-Amr has its own characteristic states and experiences after having passed through these stations, the seeker of truth gradually receives the illumination of “Divine Names” and “Divine attributes,” and finally the illuminations of the Divine essence.

Iqbal quotes this passage with approval but he castigates modern psychology for not having touched even the outer fringes of the subject. He looks to psychology for developing a new technique better suited to the temper of our times. It appears that Iqbal wants a psychological apologetic to be developed for religion. The concepts used by Sheikh Ahmad are archaic from his point of view. He demands that someone like Nietzsche should emerge – though he was a failure.

A critique of this passage shows Iqbal's contempt for tradition, and traditional nomenclature. He does not say even once, that modern psychology, since it is not supported

by a meta-physics is concerned largely with trivialities or authoritarian techniques of controlling other human beings. No amount of apologetics will help, and the language used by Sheikh Ahmad is the language of the soul, suited to spiritual aspirations. True, when he says: "Medieval mysticism has done greater havoc in the Muslim East than anywhere else." Far from preparing the Muslims for participation in the march of history, it has taught him a false renunciation, and made him perfectly contented with his ignorance and spiritual thralldom.

This is a strong denunciation of mysticism. But it is not the mystic who obstructed the march of history but colonialism which infused a sense of self devaluation among the people. Sufis are, – perhaps, the only people who refuse to copy the modern West. Hence they give the appearance of a smug quietude, which now and then erupts into states of ecstacy. For Iqbal, national-ism is a menace, but sufis are the only people who openly proclaim the ideal of Universal Love, irrespective of caste, creed or nation. Iqbal himself waxes eloquent about the contrast between the worldly life and spiritual life.

Throughout Iqbal's poetry one sees the theme of loneliness, a hunger for solitude – it is a shrieking, screaming loneliness which gnaws at his heart and expresses itself in plaintive melody.

In Armughan-i-Hijaz, he devotes some quatrains to addressing the Holy Prophet, Muhammad. In one of the quatrains he cries out,

دے بر کف نہادم، دلبرے نیست
متاعے داشتتم، غارت گرے نیست
درون سینہ من منزله گیر
مسلمانے زمن تنہا ترے نیست

(10)

I placed my heart on my palm but there is no beloved.

I have a treasure but there is no robber.

Please take abode in my heart.

No Muslim is lonelier than I am.

So with all this concern for Jihad and ceaseless social activity, he quite often expresses himself in an agony of loneliness – and seeks witnesses when he would enjoy solitude and have a direct communion with God,

He says:

سخن بے پردہ گو بامام، شدآن روز کم آمیزی
کہ می گفتند تو مارا چنین خوابی، چنان خوابی

(11)

Loneliness means being unaware of aspects of Self, or being unaware of God. Even when you are alone, you are with God,

Maulana Rumi says:

خلوت از اغیار باید نے زیار
پوستیں بہر دے آمدنے بہار

It seems that there are two streaks of mysticism in Iqbal.

One is the mysticism through thinking – in which the thought goes deeper and deeper and reaches the light. As Karl Jasper said that Kant was an intellectual mystic, who reached the unknowable through his thinking – thinking obstinately.

The other streak is mysticism which one reaches by a direct appeal to heart – through Love and Invocation of the Supreme Name.

There is a difference between the two streaks – examples are Avicenna, Sheikh Ahmad Al `Alawi, and Jung.

Avicenna said “what I know, Abu Said Abul Khair sees.”

The same thing was said by Sheikh Ahmad Al `Alawi. And when Jung was asked – Do you believe in God, Jung replied, “Why believe – I know.”

The soul is born in beauty and feeds on beauty and requires beauty for its life. Beauty and Soul can unite only in the experience of God.

¹ Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, (Persian), p. 211.

² R. A. Nicholson: *The Secrets of The Self*. pp. 95, 96, 97.

³ Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, (Persian), p. 807.

⁴ Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, (Persian), p. 222. (Translation Mine).

⁵ Sir Mohammad Iqbal: *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 1982, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁸ Musnavi-e-Molvi, Ed., Nicholson: Vol. 6, p. 300.

⁹ Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, (Urdu), p. 31. ,

¹⁰ Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, (Persian), p. 938.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.