

THE PROBLEM OF METHOD IN IQBAL'S THOUGHT

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The 'method' can be generally defined as a set of rules of procedure which are employed to attain some end. In more of a theoretical context, method implies the logic of justification or the rationale underlying an argument and the ensuing inference. Thus, the mode of validation and justification and the logic of enquiry provide the validity and force to a philosophical argument. It is, therefore, generally accepted that a systematic analysis and logical organization of the rationale and experiential processes are essential to achieve specific philosophical goals.

In the history of philosophical thought, the use of method has assumed various forms, though its application has always been for the express purpose of systematization and logical organization of thought and argument. There have been, for example, the Socratic method, the synthetic method developed by Plato, the ascetic method of Plotinus, the psychological method of Descartes, the transcendental method of Kant, the dialectical method, the intuitive method and the positivistic method etc., to name some of the few. All the various types of method generally adopt the primary ideal of descriptions of truth when thought. Concomitantly they are concerned with systematization, reform and development. There is a general consensus that the course of thought must be such as to approach reality in the subtlety of its constituents and the complexity of their inter-connections, to reconstitute concepts Judgements and inferences in correspondence with it and to realize the mutual support that these give to each other, as dealing with the same cosmos.

A more comprehensive and systematic origin of the method can be traced back in history to the Aristotelian formulation of his Analytic and Dialectic. It won a place in modern logical theory, chiefly through the use of the topic made by Descartes in introducing his reformation of philosophy, and through the laws of empirical science introduced by Bacon. The subsequent Kantian definition of method was: in fair accord with the Cartesian tradition. This sense of method is an estimate of the extent to

which the several faculties proper to a conviction have actually played their part in it. A reference to the course of our thinking is desirable largely because only in some relation to an ordered sequence can the ideals of concept, judgment and inference become a personal discipline. It is not merely awareness and grasp of the 'validity' or of 'fallacy' as the case may be, but a development of our natural 'sense of method'.

Strangely enough, one fails to find such a sense of method in Iqbal's treatment of various philosophical issues. He generally follows (at least in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*) the same philosophical tradition and jargon of which Plato, Descartes, Kant and Hegel are the typical representatives. The Western philosophical tradition, generally, portrays a uniformity of thought and argument in various systems of thought. For example, the distinct systems of idealism, rationalism, and empiricism respectively apply their methods of validation and logical justification uniformly in the areas of knowledge, reality, being etc. In Iqbal's case, however, one finds an attempt to reconcile these opposing philosophical standpoints both at the metaphysical as well as epistemological levels. Thus, while his theory of reality seems to have been characterized by some distinct features typical of empiricism, rationalism and transcendentalism at one and the same time, his theory of knowledge tries to bring together the diverse strains of thought exemplified in Plato, Hume and Kant. In this way, the cause of the lack of method and the consequent absence of logical rigor can be explained on the basis of divergence and diversity of thought in Iqbal- a style dominating most of his philosophical discussion. Consequently, a well-defined, distinct philosophical position is not easily recognizable in his case.

The ego or the self is considered to be the most, thoroughly articulated concept in Iqbal's thought. It is not only basic to his metaphysical standpoint but also provides the setting within which he operates philosophically. It is reasonable to expect a well substantiated, logically justified point of view to emerge out of his discussion' concerning the nature and composition of the 'self'. On the contrary, what we come across is a loosely argued concept of the ego with contrasting positions dominating the same issue at various stages of his analysis.

Iqbal characterizes the self as a personal activity¹ plus homogeneous unity² and then tries to reconcile it with the sheer numerical multiplicity³ of successive states. This heteroclitical position may lead one to either of the two options: (i) nominalism of Hume, or (ii) transcendentalism of Kant. Thus, one may either have to limit the self to mere successive addition of particular impressions (sensory images) or to super-impose it as an impersonal noumenal entity. But, neither Hume's atomic sensations nor Kant's rational categories are acceptable to Iqbal for his idea of the self. Hume, on perceptual grounds was unable to say anything about the real nature of the self. The ego portrayed here is a flux of sensations organized by the principle of association - impressions pass and re-pass in an infinite variety of situations. He also rejects al-Ghazali's notion of self as a simple, indivisible, immutable substance to which mental states are somehow tagged as so many qualities and which lingers on and persists as an immovable, static entity behind and over and above them. Iqbal, however, agrees with Kantian objections to the notion 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 logically illegitimate."⁴ Further, as 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.

The generous assimilation of Kantian point of view, however fails to solve the problem being faced by Iqbal. So, ' he shifts ground and turns his

¹ Sir Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Sh. M. Ashraf, Lahore, 1968. "...unity of human consciousness which constitutes the human personality" ... "Ego constantly acts on me, and thus permits me to build up a systematic unity of experience." ... "Thus my real personality is not a thing, it is an act. My experience is only a series of acts." (pp.95-104).

² "The ego reveals itself as a unity of what we call mental state" ... "The organic unity ... of these interrelated states is a special kind of unity" (Ibid. pp. 98-99). " ... not a substance but an organising principle" (Ibid. pp.40-41).

³ "I do not mean to say that the ego is over and above the mutually penetrating multiplicity we call experience" (Ibid. p. 102).

⁴ Ibid., p.101

attention to the experience of consciousness as we find it in ourselves. But, this change of stance itself is not in line with the spirit of consistent philosophical inquiry. There is a marked vacillation between normal human experience and inner experience as two diverse points of departure for comprehending the concept of ego. There are striking pointers throughout his work which betray his desire to stay within the empirical framework. In the Reconstruction, he equates the self with "the system of experiences"⁵ while in the Secrets of the Self, he is convinced that the "inexplicable finite center of experience is the fundamental fact of the universe."⁶ In fact, his criticism of the ego regarded as soul-substance clearly follows from his view that the interpretation of conscious experience is the only road by which we can reach the ego. Significantly, he then designates the body as the basic element in the construction of the ego as the 'unity of consciousness'. Projecting the soul as an organ of the body, he elaborates:

"The body is accumulated action or habit of the soul; and as such undetectable from it. It is a permanent element of consciousness which, in view of this permanent -element, appears from the outside as something stable. What, thus, is matter? A colony of egos of a low order out of which emerges the ego of a higher order, when this association and interaction reach a certain degree of co-ordination."⁷ But, then, Kantianism takes over again and, finally, Iqbal comes to hold that there had to be an "I" a profound agent above the empirical domain which acts constantly through the 'colony of sub-egos', enabling one to build a 'systematic unity of experience.'

Apparently, it is an impossible task to try to reconcile opposing views of rationalism, empiricism and transcendentalism. It is obvious that Kant, Hume and al-Ghazali who have developed their distinct systems of thought and their ideas on various philosophical issues cannot be considered in isolation from their respective systems. Any attempt to combine these diverse positions will lead naturally to philosophical difficulties. Understandably, therefore, Iqbal needs to change his stand all the time and in quick succession. Fascinated by the appeal of Humean empiricism, he

⁵ Ibid., p.106

⁶ Sir Muhammad Iqbal, *Secrets of the Self (Asrar-i-Khudi)*, translated by R.A. Nicholson, London, 1920, Preface, p.xvii.

⁷ *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, op. Cit., p.106.

appears to reject both Kant and al-Ghazali. But, then, he takes another turn, and avers, very much like Kant, that there had to be 'a profounder ego' designated by the word 'I', existing outside and above experience. Initially, he rejects both parallelism and interactionism as unsatisfactory and visualizes mind and body as composed of one single element.⁸ But, then, he suddenly agrees to admit the supremacy of the mental over the physical. Thus, the failure to make a break with the legacy of Kant effectively blocks the possibility of an original solution to the problem.

The diversity of thought and argument in Iqbal not only creates a certain inbuilt tension in his analysis but also requires looseness in organization and systematization. Thus, the lack of precise validation criteria allows for inferences not logically justified by the premises. His theory of knowledge is also typically marked by a similar state of affairs. In the field of epistemology, he tries to bring together perception, thought and intuition and binds them together in an 'organic' relationship. 'Psychologically speaking, all states are organically determined'⁹ this is a turn even more difficult to negotiate than the Kantian attempt to utilize the findings of empiricists and rationalists at one go. Notwithstanding the inherent weaknesses of a psychological basis for epistemological conclusions, no effort worth the name is made to formulate a common cognitive ground for the different levels of knowledge. Neither the appropriate categories for different levels of experience are provided nor is the manner of their application to perception, conception and inner experience made clear. The whole affair peresumably hinges on an extended use of thought and feeling as epistemological notions¹⁰. While on the one hand, Iqbal assigns thought the crucial roles of both analyzing and synthesizing the elements of experience; on the other hand, no serious effort is made to clarify and determine the function and meaning of percepts and concepts in the sphere of knowledge. He merely moves from inner experience¹¹ to concrete experience¹² and back again and visualizes these levels as developing into the common element of human insight bordering on the intuition.

⁸ Ibid. p. 105, Yet, finally, he succumbs to the supremacy of the mental over the physical.

⁹ Ibid, p.23

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 20-21, 26, 52

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 15-16

¹² Ibid., p.131

Iqbal is; thus, ready to proceed from sense-perception to intellect and then on to intuition and religious experience. Declaring that "the facts of religious experience are 'facts' among other facts,"¹³ the problem of verification criteria for religious knowledge is not exhaustively treated. Taking recourse to the notion of religious experience as "a state of feeling with a cognitive aspect"¹⁴, he emphasizes that it lends itself to the forms of idea by seeking expression in thought. While there are striking remarks about idea as the object of feeling and about idea and word both emerging out of feelingly', no attempt is made to develop the thesis further about feeling as a vehicle of knowledge. The crucial terms, viz., feeling¹⁵, object, idea and word are neither thoroughly analyzed nor their inter-relations worked out fully. Without devising the mechanism to translate feeling and word into world-language how can one logically claim to have found the cognitive element in feeling.¹⁶

A similar lack of philosophical rigor can be deciphered in Iqbal's treatment of other issues as well. Apparent disregard for the need to clarify and arrive at consistent conclusions is evidenced in his views of religious import as well. Initially, his philosophy of religion shows a peculiarly ambivalent attitude towards the great Muslim mystic Ibn' Arabi. While on the one hand, he seems fascinated by the depth and scope of Ibn Arabi's ideas, on the other hand, he unleashes a scathing attack against pantheistic interpretation of his thought. Further, Iqbal's unusual conception of man-God relationship makes it rather difficult for him to reconcile God's supreme transcendence with His immanence, and consequently, he fails to resolve the finite-infinite controversy concerning the nature of his deity. He is also unable to resolve finally the basic contradiction between man's freedom and God's omniscience and omnipotence in a satisfactory manner. A similar lack of consistency and method is manifested in his attempt to find knowledge-

¹³ Ibid. p. 16. "The facts of religious experience are facts among other facts of human experience and, in the capacity of yielding knowledge by interpretation; one fact is as good as another."

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.22.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.21. " it is the nature of feeling to seek expression in thought. It would seem that the two-feeling and idea - are the non-temporal and temporal aspects of the same unit of inner experience."

content in religious experience. Equating it with normal human experience he is unmindful of the fact that a positivistic approach to religion is doomed to lead to negative consequences.

Iqbal's style of philosophical composition is marked by a certain amount of desultoriness. He appears to ramble from idea to idea, from one theme to another, without caring much for logical sequence. Even in the Reconstruction, his way of arguing is not sufficiently rigorous and methodical. Ideas pregnant with meaning are scattered across the whole of his philosophical spectrum; but he provides only the most tenuous links. While he invokes the authority of different philosophers to support and substantiate his own favored position, in the same strain, their basic stand is made the target of a blistering attack. Very often, authorities, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern, are summoned to support a particular shade of opinion at such a pace that the reader is left breathless. In the scope of seven pages, for instance, the principal figures cited include Berkeley, Whitehead, Einstein, Russell, Zeno, Newton, al-Ash'ari, Ibn Hazm, Bergson, Cantor and Ouspensky.¹⁷ It is humanly impossible to do justice in such a short space by analysing and evaluating and then assimilating and digesting their ideas for supplementing or constructing a new view point.

It may be argued that Iqbal was unaware of these philosophical shortcomings. _ It is also a fact that the requirements of method in thought and argument was neither so crucial nor as acutely felt by Iqbal as is the case with the 'system builders' in philosophy. Probably, the lack of logical rigor in Iqbal is a need rather than a flaw. Presumably, he saw the resolution of all inconsistencies and contradictions in his humanistic attitude towards life - the evolution of man through an ever ascending order of ideals. Though he never articulated humanism precisely in the sense in which Protogoras made 'man the measure of all things,' he nevertheless incorporated in his thought all the major ingredients of a genuine humanistic standpoint. As an eclectic in the widest meaning of the term, he was open to and assimilated diverse principles and opinions emanating from a variety of schools of thought. But all these contrasting views converged on a concept of man which became a point of reference for various strands of thought in Iqbal's philosophy. It is, therefore, not at all surprising that he should come close to reflecting

¹⁷ Ibid., pp.33-39.

humanism of the classical mould, i.e. conceiving man as the center of all things. He not only recognized the value and dignity of man but also made human nature, with all its limitations and weaknesses, interests and aspirations, as the dominating, all encompassing theme of his writings. Since he deliberately made human experience the point of departure for his world-view and life-prospects, humanism naturally becomes the pivot of the rest of his philosophical concerns. Consequently, he must treat and pass judgment on related issues in accordance with the humanistic ideals. Generally, this means that philosophy had assumed a new and a novel meaning for Iqbal. Thus, with man and his life as his fundamental themes, philosophy became for him a practical, problem solving enterprise.

In the above context, the problem of Iqbal's rather supercilious style of formulating theories and his disdain for logical rigor become, crucially though implicitly, interlinked with his general attitude towards philosophy. It is implied here that Iqbal, in the interest of the scope and range of his thought, deliberately refused to reduce the divergent trends in his philosophy to a narrow, unified system of meaning. Consequently, he never seriously tries to resolve the tensions found in his thought and which result from an indiscriminate openness to a variety of perspectives. This is one of the reasons why he treats various philosophical issues at a very general level and disregards detailed specification involved in a serious form of analysis. Since his real aim was a generalized philosophy of humanism, he took liberties with the facts underlying his arguments and reached conclusions which are only vaguely substantiated. For this reason, his arguments often fail to stand up to minute philosophical scrutiny. This state of affairs is indicative of a certain resilience of mind. But, it also lends Iqbal's thought to a variety of interpretations.

The humanistic approach in philosophy need not necessarily lead to a lack of rigorous thought. It is one thing to be sincere in and committed to one's ideals while it is quite a different thing to be impatient with arguments which fortify one's position against genuine philosophical criticism. Though one may genuinely believe in the barrenness and futility of a purely philosophical speculation, this cannot be admitted as a justification and rationale for a lack of precision in what is admittedly a philosophical exercise.

If, for example, one engages in a particular game by accepting its rules, is it possible to justify the win if it is attained by violating the same rules?

What, then, is the validation mechanism adopted and employed by Iqbal? It appears that Iqbal makes use of a kind of pragmatic method to justify the conclusions drawn by him. Now, pragmatism claims that philosophical disputes can be settled by discovering the practical consequences of the notions involved. Originally developed as a theory of meaning by Pierce, it avers that meaning of concepts and statements is exhausted by the effects they may have on our experiences and actions. The pragmatic theory of truth was developed by William James¹⁸ who emphasized the effect of concepts on our senses and emotions. Truth, for him, was characterized by its agreement with reality which meant, in effect, that the truth is what works. The workability of truth, thus becomes contingent upon whatever we ultimately consider believable though believability itself may be influenced by our emotions.

Ostensibly, if Iqbal's philosophy is treated as pragmatic and humanistic in nature, it would go against the generally agreed distinction between philosophy and practical, worldly way of doing things, neither is there the scope for forcing the test of critical scrutiny and logical analysis. Nor does it correspond to the case represented by Heidegger, for example, who is openly hostile to critical analysis and professes to arrive at general conclusions by a direct, personal intuition. The distinction between the 'philosopher' and the 'sage' and even the one between 'critical' and 'speculative' philosophy is irrelevant to what Iqbal, as a matter of fact, is involved in. Obviously, the difference between a sage and a philosopher is not that one is imaginative while the other is not. The difference lies in the fact, that the philosopher submits his speculation to the discipline of minute criticism. Philosophy is neither pure intuition, nor pure speculation, nor even pure criticism. It is speculation and intuition controlled by criticism.

¹⁸ Incidentally, James and Iqbal shared many convictions and beliefs. Both sport diversity of interest and are not much bothered by the need for method in their thought. It is possible to work out a significant area of influence under which Iqbal formulated some of his views strikingly in line with those of James.

Iqbal himself seems to have no quarrel with such a characterization of philosophy. The conflict lies in the predicament where philosophical criticism tends to assume a variety of forms. Unlike science, philosophy has no common method for testing its speculations. For Hegel, it was dialectic; for Bergson, intuition; for Wittgenstein, the un-covering of non-sense; for Husserl, phenomenological description, and so on. The diversity of these views means, in effect, that devising a new method or deciding in favor of one is, as a matter of fact, 'taking sides in a philosophical dispute'. To a great extent, it is a matter of choice. In the history of philosophy, indeed, a number of procedures have been used to formulate a method and apply it. But, when we look closely at the claims for the discovery of the correct method of proceeding in philosophy, we always find that these are not always borne out by the writings of the philosophers. In this category, even such philosophical giants' as Descartes, Hegel, and even Wittgenstein can be included. So, apparently, there is no reason to reserve censure 'for Iqbal alone on this count. The lack of a closed system in his thought might as well stand him in good stead in his task of devising a new method.

As mentioned above, in thought and argument, the method is targeted at systematization, reform and development. The reality must be approached in the subtlety of its constituent parts as well as the complexity of its inter-relations. One must aim at reconstituting and re-structuring concepts, judgements and inferences in accord with the reality in question, and to realize the mutual support that these give to each other. But, the 'method' and its use in this context represent only the secondary ideals of a serious philosophical activity which is specifically relevant with definite reference to the order and process of thinking.

The primary ideals are the descriptions of truth while thought and the method plays only the role of a supporting instrument. This is reflected, to some extent, in what may be termed as a double approach to reality as exemplified in Aristotle's distinction of reason and essence or Descartes' rule of method to divide the difficulties of an inquiry, and his rule to conduct our thought in the order of simple and complex. But the description of truth is possible only when logical systematization becomes a 'personal discipline': not only an awareness of a 'fallacy' or a 'validity' but also taking birth of a natural sense of method'. The sense of method is an estimate of the extent to

which the several faculties proper to a conviction have actually played their due part in the process.

The attribute of 'conviction' is what constantly marks the views and opinions expressed by Iqbal. It is due to this conviction in the truth and validity of his standpoint that he shows much more concern for projecting 'life' in a genuinely human situation at the cost of constructing a systematic account of his philosophy. The humanistic ideal he started with, in due course, led him to pragmatism which, implicitly or explicitly became the touchstone for the truth of all his convictions. Thus, he formulated his epistemological views, directly or indirectly, with reference to their workability. In other words, pragmatism, for him, became vaguely a 'method' for solving basic philosophical disputes. Such a perspective is, indeed, direly required for a satisfactory explanation of his wide-spread unconcern for systematic philosophy it is crucial to note that his primary concern lay with the effect and workability of his ideas and not their logical coherence. He was more interested in whether what he said conduced to practical considerations and what consequences could be visualized for them. What logical form his arguments took was, for him, of secondary importance. Consequently, while he is committed to a number of contrasting claims all through his intellectual life, he is consistent in the sense that he is all the time looking at and judging his accomplishments by the pragmatic value of his arguments, beliefs and convictions and not by their logical cogency. There is, therefore, an implied suggestion that he operated within a pragmatic framework in which his writings were directed at producing results and must be judged in accordance with their practical worth and value.

It is difficult to see how important choices and decisions can be made on the sole basis of workability principle and a number of objections can be raised against recourse to this method. Apparently, 'belief' in what one is doing plays a crucial role in this regard. In fact, philosophy for Iqbal was something to live by, to be evidenced in the course of life. It had either to become integral to the corpus of one's personality or to be rejected as academic chaff. But, then, he was also not thorough enough in rejecting what did not fit in with his scheme of things. He was too liberal with his assimilation of diverse opinions which required continuous shifting of positions and re-arranging of his views. Consequently, he appears to accept views which, sometimes, stand

in diametrical opposition to his avowed stand. While such an attitude may be dubbed as the ensuing irrationalism of an humanistic outlook, it makes him more and more dependent on the workability criterion'. While this results in a sort of lack of precision in his work, it also leads to a kind of tension that runs through out his writings. While as philosopher he considers himself duty bound to exercise logical rigour and methodical coherence in his thought, his humanistic/pragmatic enterprise refuses to accept the logical limits of such an exercise. This happens to give the impression of a philosopher at work with a divided mind.