

# THE INDIVIDUAL AND ACTION IN THE THOUGHT OF IQBAL

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The thought of Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) is a product of the blending of the philosophic traditions of East and West, a blending in which the concepts and categories used by Western thinkers are employed to re-evaluate and restate the philosophic systems of earlier Muslim thinkers and of Islam itself. Iqbal's preparation for his eventual role as philosopher par excellence of the Muslim revival in India involved a thorough grounding in both Muslim and Western philosophy. As a boy he attended a Scottish missionary school and simultaneously studied under a leading Muslim scholar and theologian. At college in Lahore he earned his Master's degree in Western philosophy and subsequently went to Europe to obtain his doctoral degree in philosophy and to gain admission to the bar.

In Europe, although he continued his studies of modern Western philosophy, Iqbal wrote his doctoral dissertation (at Munich) on "The Development of Metaphysics in Persia." He spent the greater part of the years 1905-1908 in Cambridge where he came under the influence of the English neo-Hegelian school. His particular mentors were Professors McTaggart and James Ward of whom the latter made the more lasting impression. During this period Iqbal also became further acquainted with the writings of Kant, Fichte, Nietzsche, and Bergson, all of whom contributed to the development of his thought. Nevertheless, Iqbal regarded himself as a disciple not of James Ward but of Jalal al-Din Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian mystic and poet philosopher. From Rumi he drew much of his inspiration, in matters of literary form as well as philosophic content, and in Rumi he found anticipated some of the ideas of modern thinkers such as Nietzsche and Bergson.

In addition to his study of the Qura'an and of Eastern and Western philosophy, a further factor influencing the character of Iqbal's thought was the nature of the world in which he, as a Muslim and an Indian, lived. Iqbal grew to manhood during the years when, simultaneously with the appearance of Muslim reformers in other countries, the liberal teachings of the Aligarh

movement were initiating a revolution in Indian Muslim social attitudes. Thus the future of the Muslim community, in India and the world generally, was a matter of keen concern to him. The critically formative years 1900 to 1915, spanning the period from Iqbal's completion of his M.A. studies in India to the publication of his first major philosophic poem, and including his European years, were years of crisis for the Muslim world and indeed of the West as well.

At this time the political and cultural attacks of the West on Islam were met with a new sensitivity among the awakening minority of Muslims, who suffered the more through realization of their helplessness. Politically, repeated reverses for Islam in Morocco, Tripoli, and the Balkans were matched in India by the disestablishment of the Muslim Provinces of Eastern Bengal and Assam (1905-11) in the wake of Hindu terrorist agitation. Culturally, the Islamic world seemed on the verge of disintegration under the dual pressures of Western material civilization and nationalism. Although Iqbal appreciated the accomplishments of European civilization, as a non-European he was struck by its shortcomings and injustices; like other intellectuals of the time he felt the need for a new ethical and moral reintegration, to enable modern man to control the forces which science had released. Among those forces was nationalism, a divisive and destructive tribal morality which was rapidly moving Europe and the entire world toward war. Thus Iqbal was stimulated to formulate a philosophy which would give man control over himself and his destiny, would erase the narrow loyalties of nationalism, and in particular.

**would awaken the world of Islam... from the torpor of a despondent fatalism and stir them to activity in the name of the heritage of dynamic ideals which were (*sic*) that of Islam<sup>1</sup>**

Although echoes of European thinkers are evident in Iqbal, he regarded his philosophy as derived in all important points from the Qur'an; the Europeans merely provided conceptual insights useful for explaining ideas inherent in Islam. As a consequence of the Islamic milieu within which he

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<sup>1</sup> Iqbal Singh, *The Ardent Pilgrim*, (London, Green & Co., 1951), 9.53.

wrote, Iqbal's philosophy is framed as an exhortation to the Muslim community. However, in the poet's own words:

**My real purpose is to look for a better social order and to present a universally acceptable ideal (of life and action) before the world, but it is impossible for me, in this effort to outline this ideal, to ignore the social system and values of Islam whose most important objective is to demolish all the artificial and pernicious distinctions of caste, creed, colour and economic status ... No doubt I am intensely devoted to Islam but I have selected the Islamic community as my starting point not because of any national or religious prejudice but because it is the most practicable line of approach to the problem.<sup>2</sup>**

### *I. The Nature of Reality*

The point of departure of Iqbal's philosophy is his conviction that the "inexplicable finite centre of experience is the fundamental fact of the universe."<sup>3</sup> Differing from Bradley, he emphasizes that Reality is a system of finite individuals, of whom the Absolute Self is the most unique. From the conscious experience of the individual Self all else is posited:

**The form of existence is an effect of the Self,**

**Whatsoever thou seest is a secret of the Self...<sup>4</sup>**

The consciousness of the Self has two aspects, says Iqbal, efficient (active) and appreciative, which correspond to the two modes of acquiring knowledge, Intellect and Intuition. The efficient Self has 'its being in spatial, serial Time, and acquires knowledge through the analytic, ordering functions

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<sup>2</sup> M. Raziuddin Siddiqi, et al., Iqbal as a Thinker (Essays by Eminent Scholars) (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1952), pp. 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> Iqbal, The Secrets of the Self (Asrar-i-Khudi), trans. by R.A. Nicholson, (Lodon: MacMillan, 1920), p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., II. 1-2

of the Intellect. The appreciative Self is the Self seen as unified, non-serial, a synthesizing of experience; it is Ego, existing in pure Time.<sup>5</sup> The appreciative consciousness of the Ego knows itself as timeless and boundless; it gives us therefore by Intuition, direct apprehension, an insight into the ultimate nature of Reality itself, also timeless and boundless.

The concept of Time as pure duration, an organic whole in which the past exists within the present, is adopted by Iqbal from Bergson, as illustrative of Qur'anic ideas. Time as Pure duration Iqbal describes as the Qur'anic idea of destiny, "time regraded as prior to the disclosure of its possibilities."<sup>6</sup> This destiny is not a fate imposed from without, but the realizable possibilities of a thing. "To exist in real time is not to be bound by the fetters of serial time, but to create it from moment to moment and to be absolutely free and original in creation."<sup>7</sup> Thus, life is the free creative activity of the Self; the time-process is a line "in the drawing," not a temporal working out of a preconceived plan.

On the analogy of the conscious experience of life, therefore, Iqbal sees the Universe as a free creative movement, not a thing but an act. He departs from Bergson, however, in

attributing a purposive character to the Universe. The consciousness of life incorporates the experience of the past in the present, as a unity; the unity of consciousness implies a forward look as well, a look toward future purpose. The Universe is teleological in the sense that creative intelligence is constantly reformulating goals in conformity with the experience of the past. This is the only alternative to the chaotic freedom of Bergson's view, and to the view of the Universe as "an already completed product which left the

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<sup>5</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (O.U.P., 1934). p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

hand of its maker ages ago, and is now lying stretched in space as a dead mass of matter to which Time does nothing, and consequently is nothing."<sup>8</sup>

The concept of Time as pure duration, revealed by examination of the Self to be a unity interpenetrated by thought, life, and purpose, leads Iqbal to the notion of Reality as an all-embracing Self.<sup>9</sup> This Absolute Ego is infinitely creative, existing in our duration; His infinity is intensive, not extensive, as no space or time exists apart from His creative activity.

**To the Absolute Self, then, the Universe is not a reality confronting him as his 'other,' it is only a passing phase of His consciousness, a fleeting moment of His infinite life. Einstein is quite right in saying that the Universe is finite, but boundless. It is finite because it is a passing phase of God's extensively infinite consciousness and boundless because the creative power of God is intensively infinite.**<sup>10</sup>

Time, space and matter are interpretations which thought puts on His free creative energy. The infinite creativity of the Absolute precludes any notion of predetermination; the future remains an open possibility, not- a latent reality.

This brief review of Iqbal's view of reality indicates the importance in his thought of the concept of the Self, and of the free, dynamic nature of the Universe. the stage is therefore set for the individual to strive, within the limits of his own creative powers, to give purpose to the Universe.

## **The Ego**

Reality, the Ultimate Ego, is manifested according to Iqbal in a hierarchy of ego-unities, a rising scale of egohood culminating in man<sup>11</sup> the reality of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> B.A. Dar, A Study in Iqbal's Philosophy (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1944), p. 398.

these ego-unities is relative to their consciousness; man is the most real for he alone consciously participates in the creative life of his Maker. By creating the human Ego, God has limited His own creativity, to the extent that individual finite Egos participate in creative action. All life is individual, and the Ego is the highest form of that individuality thus far achieved. The efforts of the Ego to perfect this individuality by approaching God, the Ultimate Individual, require him to master nature, to absorb God into himself. The nature of the Self, then, demands affirmation:

**By the Self the seed of opposition is sown in the world**

**It imagines itself to be other than itself.**

**It makes from itself the forms of others**

**In order to multiply the pleasure of strife.<sup>12</sup>**

Desire to conquer nature gives purpose to life, and leads the Self into new fields of creativity in order to achieve its objective of approach to God.

**In great action alone the self of man becomes united with God without losing its own identity, and transcends the limits of ° space and time. Action is the highest form of contemplation.<sup>13</sup>**

To Iqbal, the perfection of the individuality of man means the achievement of personality, which distinguishes the human Ego from other forms of life. "Personality is a state of tension and can continue only if that state is maintained".<sup>14</sup> "The life of the Ego is a kind of tension caused by the Ego invading the environment and the environment invading the Ego".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Iqbal, Reconstruction, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> Iqbal, Secrets of the Self, II, 193-6.

<sup>13</sup> Dar, op., cit., p. 401.

<sup>14</sup> Iqbal, Secrets of the Self, p. xxi.

<sup>15</sup> Iqbal, Reconstruction, p. 97.

Thus personality is developed through action which maintains the state of tension; that which increases tension is good, that which relaxes it is evil all things must be judged from the standpoint of their effect on personality. Consequently, all philosophies of withdrawal or self-negation are condemned by Iqbal as tending to betray the processes which have produced man; in other words, by causing a relation of the state of tension and struggle, philosophies of negation prevent man from achieving that mastery over nature which will carry him toward perfect individuality.

The evil implied in a philosophy of self-negation may be appreciated when Iqbal's doctrine of the evolution of the Ego is understood. Matter, says Iqbal, is "a colony of egos of a low order out of which emerges the ego of a higher order, when their association and interaction reach a certain degree of coordination".<sup>16</sup> The Ego is the product of millions of years of evolution, from plant through animal to human existence; life is the condition of ego-activity, and as action caused the Ego to grow in consciousness, it advanced from stage to stage. By continued ego-sustaining action, man may advance his consciousness towards the next stage of evolution. As discussed in the previous paragraphs, the trend of life is toward the perfection of individuality and personality; "it is highly improbable that a being whose evolution has taken millions of years should be thrown away [at death] as a thing of no use".<sup>17</sup> Man therefore may be considered a candidate for immortality; in Iqbal's words: "Personal immortality is an aspiration; you can have it if you make an effort to achieve it".<sup>18</sup>

The concept of immortality as an evolutionary stage to be achieved by the creative action of the individual Ego throws additional light on Iqbal's view of the Universe. The free creative Universe is given purpose by the strivings of individual Egos seeking to fulfil their Destiny, that is, to achieve that appropriation of the Universe by the Ego which is immortality. The climax of the long evolutionary development of the Ego toward uniqueness

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<sup>16</sup> Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112

<sup>18</sup> Iqbal, *Secrets of the Self*, p. xxiii.

"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".<sup>19</sup> The creative action by the individual is not merely the means toward the development of the human personality, but can also be a step towards the eventual creative direction of the Universe itself.

The Ego-sustaining activity which carries the individual toward the perfection of individuality and personality is the acquisition of knowledge of the self and of the Universe. According to Iqbal there are, as was noted earlier, two modes of acquiring knowledge, by Intellect and by Intuition. The Intellect, by ordering the evidence of sense experience, acquires scientific knowledge of fragments of Reality. In the words of Iqbal, "the various natural sciences are like so many vultures falling on the dead body of Nature, and each running away with a piece of its flesh".<sup>20</sup> This is not to deprecate the significance of the Intellect or of science, but to indicate that the totality of scientific knowledge does not equal the totality of Reality. Sole reliance on empirical knowledge, therefore, cannot bring the Ego to its fullest consciousness and intensity—the most obvious reason being that empirical, scientific knowledge cannot explain the relation of the Self to Reality. The explanation of this relationship can be discovered only through the intuitional consciousness of the Self.

To Iqbal, Intuition, which he calls Love, is the key to the perfection of the Ego. Love is the absorptive consciousness of the Self, and in "its highest form is the creation of values and ideals and the endeavour to realize them".<sup>21</sup> By Love the Self approaches comprehension of all the implications of Reality, and thus is strengthened. Conversely, by inaction or "asking," which includes all that is achieved without personal effort—such as thinking the thoughts of others—the Ego is weakened. Hence, Love can be said to be an approach to knowledge through intense personal effort, in a sense a mystical experience.

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<sup>19</sup> Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, p. III.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Iqbal, *Secrets of the Self*, p. xxv.



In its approach to perfection the human Ego passes through stages in which the elements of Intellect and Love as means of acquiring knowledge play ferrying roles. The first stage, of Obedience to the Law, is one in which the individual is taught to limit his actions in accordance with the traditions and historical experience of the community of which he is a member. From the self-consciousness of the community the individual acquires his being and personality.

**The Individual a Mirror holds**

**To the Community, and they to him.**<sup>22</sup>

The simple sense-experiences of the community are given meaning, during the "minority of mankind," by occasional bursts of intuitional, prophetic knowledge from exceptional individual Egos.

**... Slack and lifeless hangs the warp and woof of the  
Group's**

**labour...**<sup>23</sup>

until a prophet appears, who

**Weaves all together life's dissevered parts.**<sup>24</sup>

and

**... unto one goal**

**Drawing each on, he circumscribes the feet**

**Of all within the circle of one Law.**<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Iqbal, *The Mysteries of Selflessness (Rumuz-i- Bekhudi)*, trans. by A.J. Arberry, (London: John Murray, 1953), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

In the second stage, that of Self control, the individual Ego, having developed through adherence to the rules laid down by the community in accordance with the intuitional knowledge of occasional prophets, is freed from mere obedience to command and is enabled to understand for himself the roles of Intellect and Intuition in achieving knowledge of Reality. In this stage, says Iqbal, the need for prophecy, as action by an individual Ego to lead the community toward knowledge, is outmoded. Man is thrown on his own resources, to achieve complete self-consciousness through a combination of Intellect and Love, as an individual perception of Reality, the transition from the first to this second stage is achieved by means of a final prophetic revelation, in which the road to individual action is made clear. Such, says Iqbal, is the meaning of Islam.

The third stage of the development of the Ego is called by Iqbal Divine Vicegerency, the last stage of human development on earth. Divine vicegerency is achieved when the Ego, through personal experience integrating Intellect and Love, "achieves a free personality, not by releasing himself from the fetters of the law, but by discovering the ultimate source of the law within the depths of this own consciousness".<sup>26</sup> At this stage the Ego reaches what is practically that condition of "the Infinite passing into the loving embrace of the finite"<sup>27</sup> which is the Destiny of Egohood: the absorption of God, the Ultimate Ego, into the Self.

In the concept of Divine Vicegerency critics have seen the Nietzschean Superman under a thin disguise. Iqbal, however, himself made the distinction that all men potentially were divine vicegerents, while Nietzsche thought in terms of an aristocratic few. For Iqbal the political ideal on this earth, towards which the evolution of the Ego to new levels of consciousness moves, is the "democracy of more or less unique individuals. presided over by the most unique individual possible".<sup>28</sup> This ideal is "based on the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, p. 171.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 104

<sup>28</sup> Iqbal, *Secrets of the Self*, p. xxvii-ix.

assumption that every human being is a centre of latent power, the possibilities of which can be developed by cultivating a certain type of character".<sup>29</sup> The aim of individual action, therefore, is the cultivation of this character, which takes as its fundamental principle the conviction that "the life of the Universe comes from the power of the Self".<sup>30</sup>

**All stars and planets dwelling in the sky,**

**Those lords to whom the ancient peoples prayed,**

**All those, my master, wait upon thy word**

**And are obedient servants to thy will.**<sup>31</sup>

Recognition of the Oneness of the Absolute Ego, and of the potentialities of man as in some sense a manifestation of Him, enables the individual to keep a proper proportion between the eternal values and the changing demands of material existence. the concept of Tauhid (the unity of God) implies, says Iqbal, the unity of human origin and hence the equality of men, their freedom as subject only to God, and their solidarity as having common interests.

**Islam, as a polity, is only a practical means of making this principle [Tauhid] a living factor in the intellectual and emotional life of mankind. It demands loyalty to God, [which] virtually amounts to man's loyalty to his own ideal nature. ...**<sup>32</sup>

**The State, from the Islamic standpoint, is an endeavour to transform these ideal principles into space-time forces, an aspiration to realize them in a definite human**

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. xxix.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. I, 233.

<sup>31</sup> Iqbal, The Mysteries of Selflessness, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Iqbal, Reconstruction, p. 140.

**organization. ... The ultimate Reality... is spiritual, and its life consists in its temporal activity.<sup>33</sup>**

It is because the state (or community) is conceived as a means of realizing the fundamental principles of reality in a human organization that knowledge of the nature of Reality is essential for individual political action. It will be recalled that the community and its laws mold the immature Ego in its development toward self-consciousness. Appreciation of the Ultimate nature of Reality is basic for the whole career of the Ego as an assimilative personal center of life and experience.

Conduct, which involves a decision of the ultimate fate of the agent cannot be based on illusion. A wrong concept misleads the understanding; a wrong deed degrades the whole man, and may eventually demolish the structure of the human ego. The mere concept affects life only partially; the deed is dynamically related to reality and issues from a generally constant attitude of the whole man toward reality.<sup>34</sup>

In Iqbal's formulation, the appreciation of Reality which is necessary for "reintegrating the force of the average man's inner life, and thus preparing him for participation in the march of history"<sup>35</sup> is a religious one. It is religious, however, in the sense of not being rational, and lacks any implication of otherworldliness or supernatural manipulation of mankind; as indicated before, it "amounts to man's loyalty to this own ideal nature." This ideal of the infinite creative possibilities of the Ego reaching potentially to immortality and absorption of the Absolute restores man's faith in his future and prepares him ethically for the responsibilities involved in the advancement of modern science.

Iqbal's ultimate message to political man, then is an exhilarating, at times almost ruthless, call to the individual to create his own world. Lite. said Iqbal, is power made manifest.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 147

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 147

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 177

**The man of strong character who is master of himself  
will find fortune complaisant.**

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**He will dig up the foundations of the universe  
and cast its atoms into a new mould.**

**He will subvert the course of Time**

**And wreck the azure firmament.**

**By his own strength he will produce**

**A new world which will do his pleasure.<sup>36</sup>**

Man, as a creative Ego, was entrusted by God with a free personality which he accepted at the peril of wrong action. The exercise of his free creativity may lead to immortality or to the dissolution of the Ego; this latter is the sanction which limits the action of those who, mastering themselves, are mastering Reality.

A more immediate political limitation is Iqbal's emphasis on the community and the values of its traditional practices. The past makes the personal identity of the people and of the individual; "life moves with the weight of its own past on its back".<sup>37</sup> Social rules—as exemplified in the communal prayer in Islam—unite the individual with his fellows, and give him a sense of that emotional oneness which is Reality. However, while emphasizing the complexity of society and the inter-dependence of institutions as a caveat for the reformer, Iqbal warns against a "false reverence of the past".<sup>38</sup> Each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors,"<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Iqbal, *Secrets of the Self*, p. II, 1025-34.

<sup>37</sup> Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, p. 158.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

should solve its own problems in its own way While social organization and adherence to the law serve, to a degree, to minimize wrong action by the community in periods of decline, "the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organization as on the worth and power of individual men. In an over organized society the individual is altogether crushed out of existence".<sup>40</sup>

Iqbal's message was meant to shock man into constructive action, especially the man of the Muslim East. In the Secrets of the Selflessness he emphasized the community as the matrix from which the individual sprang; in his Lectures he gave a comprehensive analysis of the individual Ego as related to Reality. But, however qualified, the basis of his philosophy remained individual action:

**The ultimate aim of the ego is not to see something, but to be something. It is in the ego's effort to be something that he discovers his final opportunity to sharpen his objectivity and acquire a more fundamental "I am" which finds evidence of its reality not in the Cartesian "I think" but in the Kantian "I can".<sup>41</sup>**

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 187.