

THE CREATIVE AND DIRECTIVE FUNCTION OF THE HUMAN EGO

Iqbal's Qur'anic Hermeneutics

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One of the great contributions of Allama Mohammad Iqbal to modern Muslim thought is his definitive concept of *kbudi* or human personality as derived from an inspired understanding of the Qur'an. He uses the word *kbudi* in Urdu and Persian to denote the ego, the self or individuality. His aim is to raise awareness regarding the special and prestigious position granted to human beings in the universe. Iqbal gives a dynamic interpretation to the concept of human personality viewed from the Qur'anic perspective. He quotes from the Qur'an in order to highlight his belief in the unique nature of the relationship between human beings and God: "After his Lord chose him Adam for Himself and turned towards him, and guided him."³⁶

The word 'Adam' is used by Iqbal as a generic term to mean humanity as a whole. The above words of the Qur'an express the special, unique and intimate relationship between God and human beings. Iqbal's concept of *kbudi* emphasizes this relationship between God and human beings as the 'chosen of God.' Iqbal's aim is to reiterate the integral Judaic Christian Islamic concept that human beings have been chosen by God for a special purpose. The Qur'an makes it very clear that the sole purpose for the creation of human beings is to worship none but God. Iqbal reveals the inner meaning of this concept when he emphasizes that in order to worship God in the true sense of the word, human beings need to reach the stage of *kbaliifatullah* or 'representatives of God on earth.'

It is good to be God's vicegerent on earth,

And to be a ruler over the elements.³⁷

³⁶ Qur'an, 20:122, quoted by Allama Mohammad Iqbal in, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1989), 95.

³⁷ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *Rumuz-i-Bekbudi*. Translation by A. J. Arberry, *The Mysteries of Selflessness* (London: John Murray, 1953) 49.

Human beings can only achieve this position if they constantly strive for the growth of their egos or selves (*kebudhi*). Strengthening of the ego takes place when the ego is not embroiled in the pursuit of pleasure or deterred by the painful and challenging experiences of life.

Life offers a scope of ego-activity, and death is the first test of the synthetic activity of the ego. There are no pleasure-giving or pain-giving acts; there are only ego-sustaining and ego-dissolving acts. It is the deed that prepares the ego for dissolution, or disciplines him for a future career.³⁸

It is through the performance of dynamic and creative deeds that the growth of the personality takes place. In fact Iqbal gives evidence directly from the Qur'an reiterating his revolutionary belief that not just the survival, but also the continuous growth of the personality can take place after death, only through the performance of "ego-sustaining deeds." The verse of the Qur'an, which he chooses to elaborate this belief, is as follows: "By the soul and He who hath balanced it, and hath shown it the ways of wickedness and piety, blessed is he who hath made it grow and undone is he who hath corrupted it."³⁹

Iqbal emphasizes the Qur'anic statement that lays stress on the responsibility which human being have towards themselves, their Lord and the creation around them. "And it is He who has made you His representative on the Earth, and hath raised some of you above others by various grades, that he may prove you by His gifts."⁴⁰

Despite all the weaknesses, a human being has been gifted with a nature, a consciousness and a soul that can enable him/her to become God's greatest creation i.e. the 'representative of God on Earth.' Iqbal writes in his *Javid Namah*:

The brilliance of this handful of dust [man] will exceed that of the angels.

Through the guidance of his destiny's star, the earth will turn into heaven.

He, whose mind is reared by constant adventures,

³⁸ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 95.

³⁹ Qur'an, 91:710.

⁴⁰ Qur'an, 6:165.

*Will rise above the whirlpool of the blue skies.*⁴¹

Iqbal believes that the ‘representative of God on Earth’ is one who has developed his personality to such an extent that it maintains its uniqueness, strength, independence and immortality despite coming into direct contact with the ‘Infinite Ego,’ meaning God. He explains the Qur’anic verse “Verily there is none in the heavens and in the Earth but shall approach the God of Mercy as a servant. He hath taken note of them and remembered them with exact numbering: *and each of them shall come to Him on the day of Resurrection as a single individual.*”⁴²

It is with the irreplaceable singleness of his individuality that the finite ego will approach the infinite ego to see for himself the consequence of past action and to judge the possibility of his future... The ‘unceasing reward’ of man consists in his gradual growth in self-possession, in uniqueness, and intensity of his activity as an ego.⁴³

In the Higher Sufism 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.⁴⁴

The personality of such an individual is developed through correct action and ego-strengthening deeds to such an extent that when he/she comes in direct contact with the Highest Personality, his/her personality is not effaced. In fact it is the ‘Infinite Ego,’ which finds expression and symbolic representation within this personality, therefore rendering it immortal and infinite.

Iqbal believes that growth of the human personality takes place as a result of the use of will power. Human beings have the power to choose between right and wrong and forge a path towards whatever goals they have set for themselves. Each and every soul will have to face its own resurrection, and no one will be able to bear another’s burden. In his lecture on ‘The Human Ego- His Freedom and Immortality,’ Iqbal states,

⁴¹ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *Jawaid Namah*, Translated by A. J. Arberry (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966) 10.

⁴² Qur’an, 93-95.

⁴³ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 117.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 88.

The Qur'an in its simple, forceful manner emphasizes the individuality and uniqueness of man, and has, I think, a definite view of his destiny as a unity of life. It is in consequence of this view of man as a unique individuality, which makes it impossible for one individual to bear the burden of another, and entitles him only to what is due to his own personal effort...⁴⁵

Iqbal's belief regarding *kebudhi* includes the integral concept that a human being is the trustee of a free personality. "Verily we proposed to the heavens, and to the Earth, and to the mountains to receive the "trust", but they refused the burden and they feared to receive it. Man undertook to bear it, but has proved unjust, senseless."⁴⁶

Iqbal quotes the Qur'an to highlight the freedom of the human personality, which accepted the "trust" placed upon it by God. The mountains, the earth and the heavens refused to take up this challenge but human beings, being inherently aware of their true potential took up this "trust". The question that Iqbal keeps asking us is: Have we taken up this challenge? Have we taken up this trust that raises our status to the highest of creation through a new birth of the spirit? He writes in his *Javid Namah*:

O good man! You came into this world through birth.

You can also leap out of it through another birth and can snap the strings that bind you.

But this new birth is not a purely physical phenomenon,

And a man of vision knows

*That the first birth was obligatory, while this second one is through your own efforts.*⁴⁷

There is another Qur'anic verse which Iqbal quotes in order to elaborate the meaning of this "trust" that humans accepted at their own peril: "By the soul and He who hath balanced it, and hath shown to it the ways of

⁴⁵ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 76.

⁴⁶ Qur'an, 33:72, quoted by Iqbal in *ibid*, 88.

⁴⁷ Iqbal, *Javid Namah*, Translated by A. J. Arberry, 10.

wickedness and piety, blessed is he who hath made it grow and undone is he who hath corrupted it.⁴⁸

Human beings accepted the challenge of this “trust” to become conscious of their own true nature, which has its roots in the Divine Life. Therefore they chose to take up the potential of becoming conscious participants in the creative unfolding of their own personalities. Human beings can raise their states of awareness from an animal-like existence to heightened spiritual states that have no limits. Human beings can make the soul grow and Iqbal uses the following verses of the Qur’an to explain how to “make the soul grow and save it from corruption.”⁴⁹ “Blessed be He in Whose hand is the Kingdom! And over all things is He potent, who has created death and life to test which of you is the best in point of deed; and He is the Mighty and Forgiving.”⁵⁰

Iqbal says that it is through actions and deeds that reveal a respect for oneself and for other human beings that the ego is prepared for dissolution or for future growth and evolution. The immortality that has been promised in the scriptures is gained through personal physical and spiritual effort that allows for the unleashing of the various divine qualities embedded within the human spirit.

The principle of the ego sustaining deed is respect for the ego in myself as well as others. Personal immortality, then, is not ours as of right; it is to be achieved through personal effort. Man is only a candidate for it.⁵¹

Iqbal believes that human being have the potential for creative growth. Growth takes place through actions, deeds and personal effort. He is against the pessimistic doctrine of Materialism, which supposes that man’s end takes place at death. For Iqbal “...death, if present action has sufficiently fortified the ego against the shock that physical dissolution brings, is only a passage to what the Qur’an describes as *Barzakh*.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Qur’an, 91:710 quoted by Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 95.

⁴⁹ See above.

⁵⁰ Qur’an, 67: 12 quoted by Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 95.

⁵¹ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 95.

⁵² *Ibid*.

The *barzakb* is a state of consciousness which experiences space and time differently from how they are experienced in this present spacio-temporal order. It is the isthmus that connects this realm of physical reality with the realm of the spirit. The realm of the spirit being so pure and powerful, that access to it is only possible through the intermediate realm of *barzakb*. The *barzakb* allows for the spiritual realm and the physical realm to find a meeting place where the qualities of both realms are integrated and amalgamated, as in the realm of dreams and the angelic realm. According to Iqbal, *barzakb* is not supposed to be experienced in a state of passivity. Instead it is supposed to be experienced as an active state of consciousness, which allows the ego to encounter, understand and interact with other levels of reality without losing its individuality. The time spent between death and resurrection is therefore a time spent in this intermediate realm of reality called the *barzakb*, where a strengthened ego does not face dissolution when faced with powerful forces from the *barzakbi* reality.

Resurrection, according to Iqbal, is nothing more than an ego's own self-assessment of its own past actions in the face of a comprehensive understanding of the actual and volitional potential for growth that it enjoyed while it was clothed in this earthly existence. The ego, therefore, experiences resurrection not as an external event but an internal self-evaluation; a resurrection of its own self from the ashes of its own past experience and the seeds that it sowed for its future growth.

Iqbal believes in the possibility of the ego's growth even after death.⁵³ He quotes the following verse of the Qur'an to substantiate this belief: "What! When dead and turned to dust, shall we rise again? Remote is such a return. Now know We what the earth consumeth of them and with Us is a book in which account is kept."⁵⁴

The Qur'an has again and again reiterated the message that the end of human life is not death of the physical body. To Iqbal, the above message suggests that the nature of individuality is such that it is maintained even after the disintegration of the body, as we know it. Although we cannot gain any 'insight' into the nature of the 'second creation' i.e. life after death of the physical body, but the Qur'an clearly teaches that it is the nature of the

⁵³ Qur'an, 91:710.

⁵⁴ Qur'an, 50:3-5 quoted by Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 98.

human individuality to remain distinct and separate. It is due to its individual character that it experiences resurrection and punishment or reward according to what it deserves through its deeds, before death. Iqbal writes:

Philosophically speaking, therefore, we cannot go further than this that in view of the past history of man it is highly improbable that his career should come to an end with the dissolution of his body.⁵⁵

In order to grasp Iqbal's understanding of the concepts of hell and heaven and the growth of the human individuality after death, the following passage has been quoted from his seminal lecture on "The Human Ego- His Freedom and Immortality". It is important to keep in mind that Iqbal came to these conclusions after an exhausting analysis of the concepts of hell and heaven as are elucidated in the vast realms of Islamic Philosophy, the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. Iqbal believes that heaven and hell are not some physical locations outside the human ego but are states of the inner human consciousness. "Hell, in the words of the Quran, is 'God's kindled fire which mounts over the hearts' (37:41-49)— the painful realization of one's failure as a man. Heaven is the joy of triumph over the forces of disintegration."⁵⁶ Iqbal does not conceive of Hell literally as a "pit of everlasting torture,"⁵⁷ imposed by a vengeful God. Instead he understands it to be a place where an ego devoid of sensitivity to God's Grace is kindled into a state from which he/she cannot but help respond to God's Power and Glory. Heaven, on the other hand is conceived as a state where the ego becomes not a passive but an active participant in the creative process.

And the recipient of Divine illumination is not merely a passive recipient. Every act of a free ego creates a new situation, and thus offers further opportunities of creative unfolding.⁵⁸

The creative unfolding of the human ego through a clear understanding of the doctrine of personal immortality is at the heart of Iqbal's concept of *khudi*.

The Creative and Directive Function of the Human Ego

⁵⁵ Iqbal, *Resurrection*, 98.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Allama Mohammad Iqbal delved into the realms of spirituality, philosophy and psychology to elucidate his concept of the creative and directive function of the human ego. After giving direct evidence from the Qur'an regarding the possibility of the ego's growth even after the event of death, he went on to explain the nature of the human ego and how the movement and growth of the ego towards its 'higher self' is possible through the directive function embedded within its very structure.

Iqbal believes that "Inner experience is the ego at work."⁵⁹ We can conceptualise or feel the ego at work in the very act of "perceiving, judging and willing."⁶⁰ Iqbal describes the life of the ego as kind of "tension" which is due to the invasion of the ego in the environment and the environment in turn permeating the ego. According to him the ego does not have a life separated from this mutual relationship between the individual and the environment, instead, it is intricately connected to it as a directive energy and is formed and disciplined by its own experience.⁶¹ He quotes the Qur'an to sustain his argument: "And they ask thee of the soul. Say: the soul proceedeth from my Lord's (*Rabbi*) *amr* (Directive Energy), but of 'knowledge only a little is given to you.'"⁶² In order to clarify the distinction between *amar* and *khalq* Iqbal resorts to the Qur'anic distinction of these two concepts. The English language may not have a separate word to clarify the distinction in God's relationship with his creation and God's relationship with the human soul, but Arabic supplies us with these separate relationships. Iqbal writes:

It has two words *khalq* and *amr* to express the two ways in which the creative activity of God reveals itself to us. *Khalq* is creation *amr* is direction. As the Quran says: "To Him belong creation and direction. (7:54)⁶³

Therefore the real nature of the soul, its essence is directive as it proceeds from the *amr* or the Directive energy of God. Another word in Arabic used in the above quoted verse of the Qur'an, which emphasizes this unique relationship between God and the human ego, is *Rabbi* (My Lord).

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 82.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

⁶¹ *Ibid*.

⁶² Qur'an, 17:85, quoted by Iqbal, *ibid*.

⁶³ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 82.

This term is supposed to highlight the intimate level of the relationship between human beings and God. According to Iqbal, it is meant to clarify the individual, specific nature of the soul with all its variations and multiple facets, which balance out into a unique whole and which hold a separate and distinct relationship with God.

The relationship with God and *khalq* or the rest of creation, is different and is based on God being the Creator and the creation being his subjects devoid of directive power. It is only and only human beings whose souls proceed from their Lords' Directive energy and therefore, however insignificant, they do have a share in God's creative power. The Qur'an informs that human beings have been given only a little knowledge of the creative power inherent within themselves. Iqbal's intention is to raise awareness that despite the fact that only a little knowledge is granted to human beings regarding the mysteries of the human soul, yet the fact that the soul proceeds from God's creative command gives human beings a powerful creative edge over the rest of creation.

Iqbal considered personality not as a thing but as an act.⁶⁴ He wrote that, "My experience is only a series of acts, mutually referring to one another, and held together by the unity of a directive purpose."⁶⁵ He lay great emphasis to action and activity rather than passivity, and He believed that Muslim suffered greatly because they did not recognize the necessity for ceaseless endeavour, ceaseless struggle in order to face the challenges of life in a creative ongoing manner. He believed that Muslims were not aware of their true nature – which is: "The soul proceedeth from my Lord's *Amr* (Directive Energy)."⁶⁶

If the soul comes directly from God's *amr*, it contains within itself that very quality to direct itself towards the highest spiritual goals. Iqbal's philosophy revolves around his intrinsic belief in human freedom and creativity.⁶⁷ It is through the God given, unique gift of will power i.e. the power to choose from many paths open to the soul, that human beings are

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Qur'an, 17: 85.

⁶⁷ For further details on Iqbal's central doctrine regarding human freedom and creativity see Latif Hussain Kazmi's article, "Iqbal and Sartre on Human Freedom and Creativity," *Iqbal Review* 41/2 (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2000) 43-70.

given a position that is superior to that of the rest of creation. If the soul chooses to direct its energies only towards material ends then that is what it achieves at the cost of the spirit. If the soul chooses to neglect the body and only concentrate on the spirit, even that is possible but, the Islamic ideal as understood by Iqbal is, when the soul uses its directive purpose; its will-power to forge a path for the betterment both of the body and the spirit. It makes, shapes sculpts both the inner and the outer environment in a harmonious, beautiful manner through constant goal setting and constant action. He has the potential to direct his soul and moves his body toward higher evolutionary goals.⁶⁸ This is how the individual becomes a conscious participant in the process of evolution taking place within the various realms of reality.

Iqbal critically analyses the theory of Descartes and Spinoza that the soul and its organism are distinct, independent of each other. Iqbal, unlike Descartes and Spinoza, is inclined to think that the postulate of matter having an independent existence is highly dubious. He states that even if we assume that the soul and body are two independent entities and the changes of both run on parallel lines, due to some pre-ordained harmony, as Leibniz believed, this would reduce the soul to a “merely passive” witness to the happenings of the body. On the other hand if we believe them to affect each other, then it becomes difficult if not impossible (to show exactly how, where and when) the soul interacts with the body and vice versa. Thus Iqbal criticizes both the theories of parallelism and interaction.⁶⁹

Iqbal is opposed to the theory of soul being separate from the body. He believes that the human ego is a single unity, which acts as a whole. “It is impossible to draw a line of cleavage between the share of the body and that

⁶⁸ Please note here that the use of the word ‘evolution’ is not drawn from Darwinianism, instead it is derived from the Bergsonian concept of ‘creative evolution,’ which signifies the growth of the soul towards its higher spiritual self. For more details regarding the influence of Henri Bergson’s philosophy of ‘creative evolution’ on Iqbal, read: “Iqbal, Pragmatism and Allied Movements,” in Dr. Muhammad Maruf, *Iqbal and His Contemporary Religious Thought* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1987) 145-153.

⁶⁹ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 84. For further details regarding how Iqbal’s philosophy differs from that of Spinoza and Descartes see Bashir Ahmed Dar’s, “Spinoza: A Great Western Pantheist,” *Iqbal* 1/3 (Bazm-e-Iqbal, 1953): 56.

of the mind in this act.”⁷⁰ Iqbal quotes the following lines from Rumi’s famous *Mathnawi*

Wine became intoxicated with us, not we with it

*The body came into being from us, not we from it.*⁷¹

Iqbal’s belief in the unity of the spirit and matter is supported by the importance he gave to the theory of Creative Evolution or Emergent Evolution.⁷² According to this theory the Ultimate Ego manifests itself through the rising evolution of life from its lowest forms of matter to the highest evolutionary form i.e. the spiritually most advanced human personality. He says, “Reality is, therefore, essentially spirit”⁷³ yet he qualifies this belief by mentioning that there are degrees of reality reflecting degrees of spirit.

In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal states very clearly that the evolutionary cycle of life demonstrates that, initially, the physical degree of reality dominates the mental, but eventually the mental starts to grow in such a way that it rises, “to a position of complete independence...”⁷⁴ He states: “The Ultimate Ego that makes the emergent emerge is immanent in Nature, and is described by the Qur’an, as ‘the First and the Last’ the Visible and the Invisible.”⁷⁵ Here Iqbal is pointing to his belief that the “Ultimate Ego” or God is deeply and mysteriously connected to all degrees of reality and it is God who uses His creative command to ensure that there is an upward march in the evolutionary scale from the point of the lowest order of existence to that of the highest order. Human beings have been given a unique role because they are the only beings in creation that have a direct and active role to play in strengthening their own egos or

⁷⁰ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 84.

⁷¹ Jalaluddin Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Translation by Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jallaluddin Rumi* (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1989) verse 1, 1812.

⁷² See Bashir Ahmed Dar’s, “Iqbal and Bergson,” *Iqbal and Post-Kantian Voluntarism* (Lahore: Bazm-I-Iqbal, 2000, 2nd ed.) 176-252.

⁷³ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 57.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 85.

⁷⁵ Qur’an, 157:3, quoted by Iqbal in *ibid*.

individualities so that they can conscious take part in, as Iqbal says, the “rising note of egohood”⁷⁶ in the various realms of reality.

Throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of egohood until it reaches its perfection in man. That is why the Qur’an declares the Ultimate Ego to be nearer to man than his own neck-vein⁷⁷Only that is, strictly speaking real which is directly conscious of its own reality. The degree of reality varies with the degree of feeling of egohood.... Man, therefore, in whom ego has reached its relative perfection, occupies a genuine place in the heart of Divine creative energy, and thus possesses a much higher degree of reality than things around him. Of all the creations of God he alone is capable of consciously participating in the creative life of his Maker.⁷⁸

As an outstanding spokesman for contemporary philosophic thought in Islam, Iqbal was convinced of the importance of creativity and creative endeavour in all branches of knowledge ranging from philosophy to science and even jurisprudence. He was keenly aware of the necessity for a renewed, invigorating and action-oriented philosophy that could rouse the Muslims from their age old, mentally and morally debilitating state. Iqbal’s view of the Ultimate Reality being ever active and ever creative is in accordance with his dynamic philosophy. God is constantly adding to and changing a universe, which is unfinished. God is both purpose and will. Allah is the Ultimate Ego and He has created egos in ascending order. Human beings are the vicegerents of God on earth. As vicegerents and reflections of the Ultimate Ego, human beings contain infinite possibilities through their power of will and action. The free will granted to human beings is to be used creatively in order to fight the evil and disintegrating force of the universe. Any action, thought or deed that weakens the integrity of the ego contributes to its disintegration and eventual dissolution. The aim for the directive and creative function of the human ego is to strengthen the ego to such an extent that human beings become co-creators and co-workers with God Himself, involved in the creative unfolding of the universe around them.

Destroy whatever does not suit you,

⁷⁶ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 57-58.

⁷⁷ Qur’an, 50:15.

⁷⁸ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 57-58.

*Create a new world out of yourself.
A free man feels unhappy,
To live in a world of others.*⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Iqbal, *Javaid Namah*, Translated by A. J. Arberry, 225.