

IQBAL'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

BY

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Iqbal cannot be classed under any of the three schools of philosophical thought: the empiricist, the rationalist or the intuitionist. In his theory of knowledge, sense perception, reason and intuition, all are combined in an organic whole. He knew full well that light from one direction alone could not illumine the whole of reality in all its manifestations. The ontological problem needs to be approached from all angles, scientific and religious, in order to secure some articulate, luminous and well-established grounds. It is in the light of this view that he advances his theory of knowledge, which promises both direct evidence and indirect experience of God or Reality—the former by intuition or immediate experience and the latter by reflective thought.

Rationalism, though not admired, is not wholly condemned and discarded by him. On the contrary, according to him, if rationalism is not divorced from concrete reality, it represents truth. This is visible from his own attitude and is also betrayed by his admiration for prophets and mystics and non-mystic rationalists, whose quest and yearning for a coherent system of ideas resting on a rational foundation and rendering religion more secure and fruitful is well-known¹. He admits and justifies the metaphysical methods. In his words, "Now since the transformation and guidance of man's inner and outer life is the essential aim of religion, it is obvious that the religious truths which it embodies must not remain unsettled. No one would hazard action on the basis of doubtful principles of conduct. Indeed, in view of its function, religion stands in greater need of rational foundation of its ultimate principles than even the dogmas of science. Science may even ignore a rational metaphysics;

1. Sir Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 1944, P. 3.

indeed it has ignored it so far. Religion can hardly afford to ignore the search for a reconciliation of the opposition of experience and justification of the environment in which humanity finds itself."² But rationalism, as preached by Iqbal, is not based upon logical categories or mere abstract representations. Born of and nursed in the realism of purely abstract ideas it is not divorced from concrete reality. It has a definite function to perform which should not, however, be over-emphasised to the detriment of other knowledge-yielding elements—at the expense of sense experience and other sources of knowledge.

Thus, while Iqbal embraces rationalism, he is not prepared to justify it at the cost of sense experience. Abstract thinking apart from the latter is of no consequence and even dangerous. He criticises Socrates, Plato, Mu‘tazilites and other thinkers for avoiding visible reality as unreliable and misleading.

Socrates restricts the field of inquiry to the human problems particularly to morality. "Trees", he says, "can teach me nothing." Even within the human field he believes knowledge is possible only through concepts.³ Only reason could give true and ultimate knowledge; sensation gives only imagination or at the most belief.

Plato also accuses sense-perception as capable of giving mere opinion and not real knowledge. He rests all knowledge upon pure reason and weaves the whole fabric of Supreme and Ultimate Reality out of ideas, taken as Eternal and Really Real. This attitude towards sense-perception is not without a parallel in the subsequent thought. Ibn Rushd and Al-Ghazali, the former while defending and the latter while attacking Greek Philosophy, have trodden the same path as far as the avoidance of empirical reality is concerned.

Iqbal attacks Ibn Rushd as well as Al-Ghazali. He contends that Ibn Rushd, through his doctrine of Immortality of the Active Intellect, takes a view opposed to what the Qur'an has to say about the value and destiny of the human ego, and thus obscures man's vision of himself, his God and his world. Similarly, Al-Ghazali's

2. Sir Mohammad Iqbal, *Op. Cit.* P. 2.

3. J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy*, P. 154.

philosophical scepticism is held by him as an unsafe basis for religion; it is also not wholly justified by the spirit of the Qur'an⁴.

All this shows that Iqbal is in favour of taking full cognizance of the visible and concrete reality. He does not encourage man's contemplative spirit to the extent that it may lead to his withdrawal from the world of matter, which, with its temporal flux and shifting phenomena, is organically related to Ultimate Reality. Hence, for the purposes of knowledge, it is entirely inconceivable to turn away from the material world and to withdraw into a purely contemplative circuit. There is no possibility of complete separation or independence of thought from concrete experience. On the contrary, one should take his start from here because it is the mental comprehension of the concrete that makes it possible for the intellect of man to pass beyond the concrete.⁵ He invites us to take account of and to be fully awake to the material phenomena with all their passing and changing scenes and sights—heaven and earth, sun and stars, clouds and mountains, deserts and oceans.⁶ They are the signs of the Ultimate Reality and it is the duty of one to reflect on these signs and not to pass by them as if one is like the deaf and the blind, for one who does not see these signs in this life will remain blind to the realities of the life to come⁷. They are the manifestations of Divine Effulgence and reflective observation into their ultimate nature reveals the secret of Divine Reality⁸.

As a matter of fact, Iqbal takes an eclectic view of the whole question. He preaches neither reason nor sense-perception exclusively. Sensation being a chaotic jumble, upholds Iqbal, cannot lead to knowledge. It is reason that imparts harmony, organisation and coherence to this chaotic jumble and moulds it into a knowledge-yielding pattern. He pleads for reflective observation and scientific experiment. He takes full advantage of modern empirical science, though he never stops short at the visible aspect of Reality as the

4. Iqbal, *Op. Cit.* P. 4-7.

5. *Ibid.*, P. 131.

6. Sir Mohammad Iqbal, *Bal-i-Jibril* Pp. 178-179 (The Spirit of Earth Welcomes The Advent of Adam).

7. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, P. 128.

8. Sir Mohammad Iqbal: *Pas Chih Bayad Kard Ai Aqwam-i- Sharq*, P. 57.

last word in the realm of existence. The sensible Reality is only a symbol of the Ultimate Reality, and the empirical attitude would bring us into contact with it.

Qur'an also takes both the conceptual and non-conceptual attitude towards existence. It recognizes the rationalistic attitude as the cause of the superiority of man over angels, and goes on to say that man has the ability to name things which endows him with the power of capturing them intellectually and thereby rising in the level of existence. But concepts here are not abstract logical entities. They are based on facts of sensation and are indissolubly united with the sensible and observable aspect of Reality. In other words, the knowledge of things is described by Qur'an as the knowledge of names.⁹ Again, Qur'an repeatedly invites man to take account of the physical phenomena. As Iqbal puts it, the Qur'an "sees in the humble be a recipient of Divine Inspiration and constantly calls upon the reader to observe the perpetual change of the winds, the alternation of day and night, the clouds, the starry heavens, and the planets swimming through infinite space"¹⁰. Iqbal fully agrees with the non-classical attitude of Qur'an and develops his own theory in consonance with it. Qur'an has a place for both metaphysics and empirical sciences. And it is through metaphysical search-light that Iqbal examines scientific researches and develops his own theory.

But Iqbal is fully alive to the limitations and short comings of knowledge gained through the normal channels. Firstly, scientific investigation and analytic thought have inherent limitations which are unavoidable. Scientific analysis is never complete and exhaustive in its nature. Reality is an organic whole. Its parts are united by vital internal connections. This underlying relationship confers a wholeness in the diversities and pluralities. Analysis would select a part of reality which, when taken apart, would become lifeless, shorn of the qualities it has by virtue of its integral position within a whole. It is rendered meaningless apart from its relations, as a part separated from its pattern, a single dot or line taken out from

9. Iqbal, *Payam-i-Mashriq*, P. 6.

10. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, P. 3.

the whole picture. Besides, analysis because of the immense complexity of its object can never attain ideal completeness. The ideal analysis involves the description of all the constitutive elements of a subject. It fails if any single element escapes notice or the units reached in the process are not ultimate. However, such an ideal cannot be accomplished, hampered as we are by our limitations. If we go a step further we find that the defect of analysis would also distort synthesis which is based upon it. In synthesis those elements only are combined that are discovered in the process of analysis. Thus the incompleteness of analysis results in the incompleteness of synthesis. It is obvious that an object discovered in this manner is not what it actually is but merely what it is mentally construed. Even if the completeness of analysis is taken for granted, what we cannot afford to overlook is the importance of the vital inner connections underlying the whole reality, which are lost through the analytic procedure. Spaulding, who believes that the whole is nothing but "the parts and their properties and the relations relating the parts and the possibly specific properties of the whole,"¹¹ has tried to remedy this defect of analysis. He asserts that the knowledge of the parts when accompanied with the knowledge of their relations could give the knowledge of the whole. This assertion carries some truth in the mechanical realm but is futile in its application to the knowledge of an organic whole. "The properties of the whole can be known from the observation of the behaviour of the whole as a whole; analysis does not disclose them."¹² Iqbal has kept this fact in view and does not over-emphasise the role of the analytic method, though he assigns to it a legitimate place in the practical domain. According to him, empirical sciences give a sectional and fragmentary knowledge of reality which, though trust worthy, verifiable and even useful so far as the prediction and control of events of nature go, does not explain Ultimate Reality in its entirety. Glorify as they do in an artificial, selective and sectional process which uses concepts relatively applicable to different levels of experience, they fail to

11. Spaulding, *The New Realism* P. 161, (1922),

12. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, P. 43.

give the complete view of Reality.¹³ It is an irony that our analytic thought first puts a veil on the face of Reality¹⁴ and then endeavours to penetrate through it. Its path is zigzag and intricate; its approach and progress are gradual and slow.¹⁵

Yet another difficulty besets the knowledge of ultimate reality. The subjective element, as the constituent element in the sensible Reality, has rendered the really Real unknowable. Kant goes so far as to reduce even space and time to subjective modes or forms of apprehending Reality; they are no more objective realities, empirical concepts or outward intuitions. They are merely the constructions or forms of inner sense, the necessary *a-priori* representations underlying all outer intuitions.¹⁶ The manifold of senses when it reaches us, has lost its purity; in order to reach us it has to fulfil the formal conditions and is bound to pass through the coloured glasses of space and time. "The thing in itself is only the limiting idea. Its function is merely regulative. If there is some actuality corresponding to the idea it falls outside the boundaries of experience and consequently its existence cannot be rationally demonstrated."¹⁷ Iqbal also believes that serial time and space are subjective and not objective realities.¹⁸ But he disagrees with Kant in so far as the acquisition of the knowledge of Ultimate Reality is concerned. The Ultimate Reality lies outside the normal level of experience, inaccessible to sense-perception and pure reason. But the normal level is not the only knowledge-yielding level.¹⁹

Though Iqbal is convinced that serial time and space are subjective, he departs from the view that they are the final and inflexible mental forms determining and limiting all knowledge. He takes the view that our intuitive experience is not determined and systematised by space and time. When we dive within our own self and pass

13. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, P. 43.
14. Iqbal, *Payam-i-Mashriq*, P. 35.
15. Iqbal: *Javid Namah*, P. 17-18.
16. Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, Pp. 67-77.
17. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, P. 181.
18. Iqbal, *Ibid*, Pp. 52-53; also, Iqbal: *Zabur-i-'Ajam* Pp. 215-216.
19. Iqbal, *Ibid*, P. 181.

from sense-perception to intuition of the self, we perceive Reality, not as a concept or intellectual construction, not as a solid block or substratum underlying or holding together all experience, but as a dynamic and creative flow living in pure duration in which time is divested of spatiality and appears in its organic wholeness. However, it is no less true that this stage is attainable only through profound meditation, when the appreciative self gets the upper hand and all its potentialities are unfolded. It is now that the psychological experience expands into the intuition of Ultimate Reality—God. It discloses Ultimate Reality as a flux, a dynamic and creative flow that involves a progressive synthesis of various stages, in which life, thought and purpose all interpenetrate to form an organic whole.²⁰

Iqbal identifies intuition or immediate experience with love. Intuition or love would unfold to him new spheres of illumination, wherein unroll vistas of Reality comprehending Divine Presence itself. In contrast, the knowledge yielded by intellect is sectional, piece-meal and fragmentary because it is involved in the labyrinth of space and time. The knowledge through intuition is not imparted partially and by *innuendo*. It is grounded in the deeper and higher self of man. It is *incorporeal* and eternal and leads directly to the *incorporeal* and the eternal.²¹ Knowledge through love or intuition means knowledge through the heart, wherein we have change but no succession, pure duration but no serial time.²² It comes with a surer step, has a higher and more profound air of authority about it and is born out of direct and immediate luminousness. But it should not be construed that intuition is antagonistic to analytic thought or intellect. Love and intellect both aim at the knowledge of reality and differ only in the courses they adopt. The intellect grasps and views certain parts of reality as abstracted from the whole; it gives only the temporal aspect of reality. Intuition reveals the reality in its wholeness and fulness. It is the method which takes things as a whole without waiting for analysis.

20. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* Pp. 52-57.

21. Iqbal, *Javid Nama*, Pp. 1-18.

22. *Ibid*, P. 4.

Through a comprehensive grasp it gives the deepest truth. It forms that point of vantage which affords a perspective of the whole domain of Reality. Rather, it is the gateway at which Truth and Reality “rap and knock and enter our soul.” Intuition and intellect together may be visualised as a double-edged sword in man’s hand. With one edge he invades the Ultimate Reality; with the other he invades the Universe. In other words, the ego has two eyes: with one eye he sees and approaches the inner and invisible Reality, with the other, the visible Reality. If the ego sees with one eye, it commits a great sin; if it uses both eyes it reaches its destination.²³ Neither of them constitutes the exhaustive method or the only road to truth. Both should be employed and potentiated in the pursuit of exhaustive knowledge. They have a common source and are complementary to each other. Intuition is only a higher developmental state of intellect, and in order to view Reality as a whole it is necessary that we supplement intuition with intellect.²⁴ Intellect, when it is fused with love, becomes, as it were, illuminated by Divine Light; similarly, love when buttressed by intellect becomes more powerful and potent.²⁵ Knowledge based entirely upon reason and intellect, the intricate labyrinth of abstract reasoning, can lead to that articulation of beliefs which constitutes proof and demonstrated knowledge. But unless intellect is supplemented with intuition, this knowledge would become narrow, partial and lifeless and would lead to stagnation and pedantry. Intuition is its life and spirit; it is its “*ruh ul-qudus*” without which it would be reduced to a mere magic show, too impotent and crippled to lead us on to fruitful results.²⁶ Intellect, if not guided by love, becomes devilish or satanic—an evil force. It generates darkness and leads the world to blind power, chaos and destruction. Unanimated by love it is dead and lifeless, and its arrow, unguided as it is, flies without aim.²⁷ Let it be quickened and guided by intuition, love, yearning, and it

23. Iqbal, *Zabur-i-Ajam*, Pp. 207-208.

24. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, P. 2-3.

25. Iqbal, *Javid Namah*, P. 71.

26. *Ibid*, P. 4.

27. Iqbal, *Javid Namah*, Pp. 82-83.

shall yield knowledge par excellence—good, rounded and indispensable knowledge—knowledge which is power, encompassing heaven and deriving light from the stars, which contains the description of the whole existence and to which is related the destiny of the whole of existence. Intellect infused with intuition gives celestial and divine knowledge.²⁸ Intuition or love is thus the very law of life and regulative power. It expands and enriches personality, and confers vision. At the same time, it is corrective of intellect and abstract thought, of science and common sense.

If the above analysis is correct, the unqualified dismissal of the role of intuition or love in the achievement of knowledge as unscientific by the apostles of reason would appear to be highly unreasonable.

Though intuition is a mode of dealing with Reality in which sense-perception has no part to play, yet it gives knowledge, which is as concrete as that yielded by any other experience.²⁹

Intuition has its peculiar characteristics which differentiate it from intellect and sense-perception. They can be enumerated as follows:

1. It gives the direct and immediate experience of Absolute Reality or God. "God is not a mathematical entity or a system of concepts mutually related to one another and having no reference to experience."³⁰ Intuition gives the experience of God as sense-experience gives the experience of perceptible reality. And as regions of normal experience are subject to interpretation of sense-data for our knowledge of the external world, so the region of mystic experience is subject to interpretation for our knowledge of God.³¹
2. Mystic experience is characterised with un-analysable wholeness. It gives reality as an indivisible organic unity, not as broken segments with many missing links. The reason is that it does not entangle itself in a sectional treatment of

28. *Ibid*, Pp. 82-83.

29. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, P. 16.

30. *Ibid*, P. 19.

31. *Ibid*, P. 18-19.

reality, which would allow only a selective study of certain parts of its visible aspects. This *modus operandi* is the delight of rational consciousness, which specialises in analysis and synthesis as dictated by the practical needs of adaptation to our environment.³² As for example, out of the innumerable sense-data in a room, our rational consciousness selects only that which on synthesis would yield us the single experience of a table.³³ In mystic experience which includes the cognitive element in its minimum degree, there is no possibility of such analysis. It is unique in so far as it ranges beyond these frontiers and brings us into contact with the total passage of reality, in which all the diverse stimuli run into one another forming a single un-analysable unity, and in which the ordinary distinctness of subject and object does not exist.³⁴ But we should not run away with the idea that mystic experience is some "mysterious faculty"³⁵ having no continuity with ordinary consciousness, as maintained by William James.

3. God or Ultimate and Perfect Reality is both immanent and transcendent. He not only permeates and encompasses the universe but also His domain rolls beyond it. He is the unique Other Self that transcends and encompasses the private personality of the finite individual Self. Mystic experience brings the mystic into direct communion with God, "momentarily suppressing"³⁶ his own individuality. He is for the time being submerged in Supreme Reality and loses consciousness of himself as a distinct and private personality. But he emerges from his experience all the richer for in this brief moment of intimate association with God he has perceived Him as an Independent Other Self and as a Concrete Individual.

32. Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, P. 19.

33. *Ibid*, P. 19.

34. *Ibid*, P. 19.

35. *Ibid*, P. 16.

36. *Ibid*, P. 19.

It is, therefore, erroneous to presume that the mystic state is "a mere retirement into the mists of pure subjectivity."³⁷ Far from being so the contents of this experience are as objective as the knowledge yielded by an ordinary social experience. This may sound strange because we tend to believe that all objective experience must necessarily stem from sense-perception. But it is an extremely fallacious view. For, if it were true, we could never be sure of the reality of our social experience in so far as we know others as conscious beings. Granted that the knowledge of visible reality is based on sense-perception, granted also that the knowledge of our own inner and outer self is based on inner reflection and sense-perception, but when it comes to the knowledge of other conscious beings as such we are undergoing immediate experience—we are inferring the existence of a similar consciousness in them on the analogy of our own emotional states, which are exhibited by the two of us by similar physical movements. We do not tarry to work out or belabour the analogy in our daily lives; but the knowledge that the individual before us is a conscious being floods our mind as an immediate experience, which is further supplemented by his response to our signals, a fact which gives completeness to our fragmentary meanings. We never entertain any doubt about the validity of this knowledge because of its inferential quality. In the ultimate analysis the mystic and the social experience are parallel to each other; and they therefore belong to the same category.³⁸

4. The mystic experience is direct and immediate and hence does not lend itself to communication as such. It is feeling rather than thought, but like all other feelings it has a thought element which gives it direction and shapes it into an idea. It has two aspects: non-temporal and temporal. The non-temporal aspect is feeling, whereas the temporal aspect is

37. Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, P. 21.

38. Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, P. 21.

idea. The non-temporal aspect is also not without a sense of direction. Feeling is outward-pushing as idea is outward-reporting. Feeling is ever directed towards something that is feeling, some objective which transforms its characteristic instability into stability. It gives the direct vision of reality. But mystic experience, untouched as it is by discursive intellect, would not lend itself to transmission in logical forms. Nevertheless it seeks expression in thought and can be conveyed as interpreted by the prophet or the mystic who has experienced it.³⁹

5. The mystic experience reveals Reality as an eternal whole unbounded by past and future, as a single eternal now, and establishes the unreality of the serial character of space and establishes the unreality of the serial character of space and time. But this state does not abide. It gives the vision of reality and soon fades away leaving a sense of authority behind it.⁴⁰ "Both the mystic and prophet return to the normal levels of experience; but with this difference that the return of the prophet may be fraught with infinite meaning for mankind."⁴¹

The path to intuition, according to Iqbal, lies through religion. The intuition of the self as a psychological experience is approachable to all even at the normal level. But the higher intuition or the intuition of God is achieved gradually through a definite course only as the religious consciousness expands in intensity and richness. It consists of three stages, faith, thought and discovery. The first is the period when the individual, through his adherence to the unconditional command, cultivates self-discipline. Here we have the un-demurring surrender to Divine Law without the interference of reason or logical demonstration. It enables man to find his niche in the set-up of political and social life. But so far as the evolution of man's inner self is concerned it is of no consequence. This

39. *Ibid*, Pp. 21-22.

40. *Ibid*, P. 23.

41. *Ibid*, Pp. 23-24.

stage leads to the next where reason and rational understanding manifest themselves as the source and ground of the authority of discipline, thus basing religion on metaphysics or philosophy. This is followed by the third and highest stage where philosophy gives place to psychology and the individual develops a yearning to attain direct contact with Divine Reality. "It is here that religion becomes a matter of assimilation of life and power; and the individual 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 his own consciousness".⁴² The Book is not imposed as something external but is revealed to a prophet. It is the period of discovery or intuition. "The climax of religious life, however, is the discovery of the ego as an individual deeper than his conceptually describable habitual self-hood. It is in contact with the Most Real that the ego discovers its uniqueness, its metaphysical status and the possibility of improvement in that status. Strictly speaking, the experience which leads to this discovery is not a conceptually manageable intellectual fact; it is a vital fact, an attitude consequent on an inner biological transformation which cannot be captured in the net of logical categories. It can embody itself only in a world-making or world-shaking act; and in this form alone the content of this timeless experience can diffuse itself in the time-movement, and make itself effectively visible to the eye of history. It seems that the method of dealing with Reality by means of concepts is not at all a serious way of dealing with it. Science does not care whether its electron is a real entity or not. It may be a mere symbol, a mere convention. Religion, which is essentially a mode of actual living, is the only serious way of handling Reality."⁴³ Science deals with concepts, factual reality or the "causality-bound aspect of nature", but the physical, sensible and external causality-bound aspect of nature does not exhaust the realm of Reality. The other aspect of reality is not less important than the visible one. It invades consciousness from another direction, untouched by rational thought dealing with the optically present universe. This broad path can

42. Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, P. 183.

43. Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, P. 183.

be opened through religion only, because religion concerns itself with deed, which is the outcome of the constant attitude of man's whole personality or structure to reality. The deed, "*i.e.* the control of man's physiological and psychological processes", is dynamically related to reality and prepares the finite self for immediate association with Infinite Ego."⁴⁴

Hence, religion, as Iqbal would have it, is not a mere collection of dogmas or theological formulae: "Conservatism is as bad in religion as in any other department of human activity. It destroys the ego's creative freedom and closes up the paths of fresh spiritual enterprise."⁴⁵ Religion in its highest manifestation does not imply the life-denying and fact-avoiding attitude. It does not work as an external imposition on the free and spontaneous expression of human personality. On the contrary, it is the open sesame to fresh and mere fruitful directions to communicate with the Ultimately Real. It awakens and actualises the level lying close to the normal level, directing one's vision to the inner side of the self. It regenerates the inner powers and possibilities of the human self. It expands and enriches the fields of human thought and emotion. It unlocks fresh spiritual sources. During this period man gets the power to overcome his intellectual reconstruction and to penetrate the crust of causal sequence and spatio-temporal manifold. He comes into contact with the everlasting and eternal source of life and power.

Here we have a picture of Iqbal's theory of knowledge in which he endeavours to give us a clue to the Ultimate Reality. Whether the perfect knowledge of the actual and The Ultimate Reality, of the final nature and essence of things is possible is a very subtle question. Iqbal's answer to it is an unhesitating, bold and optimistic affirmation. Reality can be known, grasped and comprehended not only in its partial and fragmentary aspect but also in its completeness. The great merit and virtue of his theory lies in the fact that he does not adopt and exalt any one method at the cost of the others.

44. *Ibid*, 182.

45. *Ibid*, 182.