

EMPIRICAL AND INTUITIVE
KNOWLEDGE IN IQBAL'S THOUGHT: A
SYNTHESIS OF SENSE AND SPIRITUAL
PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author examines Iqbal's theory of knowledge, beginning with Iqbal's assertion on Ultimate Reality, which reveals symbols both externally and internally. Iqbal attributes importance to sense-perception as a way to understand the observable aspects of reality. While he acknowledges the value of empirical knowledge, he emphasizes that it is merely a stage in humanity's spiritual journey. Iqbal critiques modern empiricism for focusing solely on external reality and neglecting its inner, spiritual dimensions, which are accessed through intuition, or "*qulb*." For Iqbal, intuition is not a mysterious faculty but another mode of engaging with reality, and its insights are as concrete as those obtained through sense-perception.

Iqbal applies Kant's distinction between pure and practical reason but goes beyond them, asserting that true thought is dynamic and capable of reaching the Infinite. He argues that thought and intuition are interdependent, both necessary for a comprehensive understanding of reality. This synergy between reason and intuition, Iqbal believes, can lead to a fuller vision of the Ultimate Reality.

Furthermore, Iqbal advocates for a holistic approach to knowledge, combining empirical and intuitive insights. He critiques both the East and the West for their partial approaches, suggesting that only the fusion of love and intellect can provide a complete understanding of reality. Iqbal's theory thus rejects the opposition between sense-knowledge and intuitive knowledge, proposing instead that both must work together to illuminate the truth.

In addition to sense-perception and intuition, Iqbal acknowledges history as a third source of knowledge, though he focuses more on the former two. The article concludes by highlighting Iqbal's unique contribution to mysticism and religious philosophy, particularly his view that mystic knowledge, like other forms of knowledge, is grounded in the everyday world.

While writing on Iqbal's theory of knowledge I have chosen to begin with his very basic assertion on the Ultimate Reality that it reveals its symbols both within and without.¹ The symbols revealed "without" are the vicissitudes of nature which are amenable to sense-perception and are studied by the sciences. Iqbal here assigns a due place to sense-perception as a source of knowledge and describes it as the knowledge of the 'observable aspects of Reality'.² In fact, he believes that inasmuch as man has to live in the obstructing environment, he requires sense-perception to enable him to carve his way through this labyrinth in order to live a smooth life; he has to master his environment rather than enslave himself to it. For Iqbal, however, (and this is very important) the empirical attitude is not to be treated as a detached and isolated one as held by his Western predecessors and contemporaries of the empirical school of thought; it is rather 'an indispensable stage in the spiritual life of humanity;...'³ He adds, 'It is our reflective contact with the temporal flux of things which trains us for an intellectual vision of the non-temporal'.⁴ Thus, for Iqbal it is not only that empirical awareness is a kind of knowledge, it is rather an indispensable pre-condition for the spiritual understanding and uplift of man. He further adds that 'man, who has to maintain his life in an obstructing environment, cannot afford to ignore the visible'.⁵ Thus, Iqbal was not an anti-empiricist, nor he was an empiricist in the strictly modern sense, and what carries him beyond empiricism is his belief that this empirical and reflective contact with nature is not an end in itself. Modern empiricism has confined itself exclusively to the "outer" aspect of reality, unmindful of its internal, spiritual, and more 'intimate aspect which reveals itself "within", i.e., through more subtle source of experience. This approach renders it one-sided.

But what is that 'more intimate aspect of reality and what is the nature of that "within" to which it is revealed? In one word, it is called '*qulb*', "heart" or 'intuition' which is 'a kind of inner intuition or insight'⁶ (to use a phrase from Iqbal). It is something which (in the words of Jalal-uddin Rumi) 'feeds on the rays of the sun and brings us into contact with aspects of Reality other than those open to sense-perception'.⁷ This description of the great Muslim sage brings intuition closer to other ordinary sources of experience which also

'feed on the rays of the Sun', the fountainhead of all light and vision in the world. Talking of the nature of this source of knowledge Iqbal expressly says that it is not to be regarded as 'a mysterious special faculty' as is commonly thought; 'it is rather a mode of dealing with Reality in which sensation, in the physiological sense of the word, does not play any part. Yet the vista of experience thus opened to us is as real and concrete as any other experience'.⁸ Here he emphasizes two very important aspects of intuition: (i) the data which come through this source are other than the sensations in the ordinary sense, and (ii) the knowledge which it brings is as real and concrete as through any other source of experience. Here the question arises as to what is the nature of this 'datum' and what fashions it into the form of knowledge proper? Iqbal says that its 'reports, if properly interpreted, are never false'.⁹ But what is it which 'interprets' these data? It is now common sense that in the case of sense-knowledge the data are interpreted by reason or, to use a Kantian terminology, "understanding". Iqbal accepts this Kantian model when he says that 'knowledge is sense-perception elaborated by understanding'.¹⁰ He also adds that the character of man's knowledge is conceptual.¹¹ "Iqbal then applies this model to mystical or religious knowledge also and holds that in this case, too, the data supplied by intuition are organized and interpreted by 'thought'. He agrees with those who say that 'discursive thought' plays no role in religious knowledge,"¹² but he adds that it is not the only kind of thought. This brings us to his theory of thought which plays an important role in his theory of knowledge.

Following the legacy of Aristotle, Kant admitted two kinds of 'thought' viz.,

(i) Pure thought or reason which is analytical and discursive, and
(ii) Practical reason which operates in the sphere of practical matters like morals. The former being analytical is the tool used in the field of sciences; its chief function being to pick a whole to its pieces with a view to understand it. This is why Iqbal compares sciences to so many vultures, each snatching away its own piece of flesh from the dead body of nature.¹³ According to Iqbal, this kind of reason cannot reach the true nature of reality. The Practical Reason (as Aristotle held himself), being concerned with the means to a given end only, and not being able to give the end itself which comes through some other sources, is also unable to reach the real. In Iqbal's view these two kinds of thought are only superficial and do not reach the inward nature of reality; however, he adds, in the company of that great Muslim thinker al-Farabi¹⁴ (870-950 A.D), that

thought has a deeper movement also in which it is capable of reaching an immanent Infinite in whose self-unfolding movement the various finite concepts are merely moments'.¹⁵ By this he means that thought is not static in its true nature, but 'is dynamic and unfolds its internal infinitude in time like the seed,...'¹⁶ In other words, the infinite is implicitly present in thought and is not alien to it as is sometimes held. In this deeper movement, he agrees with al-Farabi, thought and intuition become one a fact which was realised neither by Imam Ghazali (d.1111) nor yet by Kant. According to Iqbal, 'thought and intuition are organically related',¹⁷ though, he goes on to add, thought must necessarily simulate finitude and inconclusiveness because of its alliance with serial time',¹⁸ Hence, thought is infinite and the view that it is essentially finite and thus incapable of reaching the Infinite 'is based on a mistaken notion of the movement of thought in knowledge'.¹⁹ For this mistake Iqbal accuses logical understanding 'which finds a multiplicity of mutually repellent individualities with no prospect of their ultimate reduction to unity that makes us sceptical about the conclusiveness of thought'.²⁰ He condemns both Ghazali and Kant on the ground that they 'failed to see that thought, in the very act of knowledge, passes beyond its own finitude'.²¹ This passage is 'possible only', he says, 'because of the implicit presence in its finite individuality of the infinite, which keeps alive within it the flame of aspiration and sustains it in its endless pursuit'.²² It is wrong to regard thought as inconclusive for it..., 'in its own way, is a greeting of the finite with the infinite'.²³

The question arises how thought in this special sense operates on the Special data to carve them into religious knowledge, say the knowledge of God? Iqbal's position implies that the operation of thought on the religious data is analogous to its operation on sense-data. In both the cases, thought organizes the data supplied into the finished product called 'knowledge'. But apart from the difference of the nature of data in the two cases, thought operates on the sense-data from "outside" and has nothing to do with the data itself, whereas in the case of religious data thought is not 'a principle which organizes and interprets its material from the outside, but as a potency which is formative of the very being of its material'.²⁴ In other words, the relation between thought and its data is not an external' one as is the case with sense- data; the two rather become one in the process of knowledge, Iqbal says of thought and intuition, "They spring up from the same root and complement each other".²⁵ they are 'in need of each other for mutual rejuvenation'.²⁶

It is not only that sense-perception and intuition are two equally important sources of knowledge; they must work together and complement each other in order to provide a complete and exhaustive knowledge of the real. Iqbal says in *The Reconstruction* that 'prayer must be regarded as a necessary complement to the intellectual activity of the observer of Nature'.²⁷ Not only this, he goes on to add 'that all search for knowledge is essentially a form of prayer. The scientific observer of Nature is a kind of mystic seeker in the act of prayer.'²⁸ Iqbal goes a step further when he says in his Persian verse *Gulshane Raze Jadeed*, (*The New Rose Garden of Mystery*): 'If he should close one eye, it would be sin: it is by seeing with both eyes that he can gain the path...'²⁹ Thus, he is against one-sidedness and partiality in knowledge, for only a fuller and comprehensive vision can reach the ultimate reality. Iqbal condemns both the East and the West for their one-sided and partial approaches. In his Persian verse *Javid Namah* he says, 'For Westerners intelligence is the stuff of life, for Easterners love is the mystery of all being.'³⁰ Only if they were to combine the two, they would get to know the ultimate reality. He says, 'Only through love intelligence gets to know God,...'³¹ Not only this, but this combination will enable them to chalk out a new world. He bids the Westerners and Easterners both to 'rise and draw the design of a new world, mingle together love with intelligence'.³² Only such an amalgamation of love and intelligence, of intuition and sense-perception, can afford a fuller and more comprehensive vision of the ultimate reality. Thus, in Iqbal's view there is no opposition between sense-knowledge and intuitive knowledge; rather they should work in complete unison and complement each other's illumination.

Besides these two sources of knowledge i.e., sense-perception and intuition - Iqbal acknowledges a third source of knowledge, viz., History,³³ which deals with the knowledge of nations and societies, as to how their rise and fall occur and what are the principles and factors controlling them. However, he does not elaborate much upon this source of knowledge. He has, no doubt, devoted his famous *mathnavi Ramuze Bekhudi*³⁴ (*Mysteries of the Selflessness*) to an elaborate study of the people and society, but it is not from an epistemic point of view that he deals with them. Hence, Iqbal's chief interest centers round a discussion of sense-perception and intuition which are the "outer" and "inner" sources of knowledge respectively.

Though agreeing with the mystics that discursive thought plays no role in religious knowledge, Iqbal compares all human knowledge

to discursive knowledge in one very important respect, i.e., as ‘a temporal process which moves round a veritable ‘other’, supposed to exist per se and confronting the knowing ego’.³⁵ Here he tries to bring home some very important facts about human knowledge, namely, it always involves a trio, i.e., (i) the knowing subject, (ii) the object to be known, and (iii) the act of ‘sensing’ or perceiving. What he wants to stress is that no knowledge is possible in the absence of any of these three terms. This view of knowledge leaves absolutely no room for the state of *‘hulul’* or *‘fana’* (i.e., abnegation of the self) in the process of knowing the ultimate reality as held by a majority of mystics and even by the *sufis*. Thus, Iqbal denies that any knowledge can take place while the recipient is in a state of trance or ecstasy because in that use the difference between the subject and object would vanish and with that the relationship between them would also cease. Hence, even in the case of mystic knowledge he believes in the necessity of the said trio. In fact, this position draws upon his view of the end of the ego’s quest which, according to him, ‘is not emancipation from the limitations of individuality; it is on the other hand, a more precise definition of it.’³⁶ In his *Javid-Namah*, he beautifully says: ‘No one can stand unshaken in His Presence: and he who can, verily, he is pure gold’.³⁷ By implication, only such a one can acquire knowledge of the ultimate reality.

One more important point which Iqbal emphasizes in the case of mystic knowledge ‘is a moment of intimate association with a Unique Other Self, transcending, encompassing, and momentarily suppressing the private personality of the subject of experience.’³⁸ It carries two important conditions, viz., (i) it involves an intimate association with “a Unique Other Self and (ii) the private personality of the recipient is momentarily suppressed. Now as far as the first condition is concerned, Iqbal clearly means by this Unique Other Self nothing other than God, a point on which some of the mystics will not go with him. The second condition, however, seems to contradict his main thesis that the recipient retains his personality through the whole experience as a necessary pre-condition of mystic knowledge. Here Iqbal is, most probably, equating this experience with an aesthetic experience in which case the experiencing self is momentarily and partly “suppressed”. This, however, can be a pre-condition of “appreciation” but not of knowledge” which requires that the recipient must retain himself. This point simply explains that mystic knowledge, which is like any other Land of knowledge qua knowledge, involves a kind of appreciation also - a fact which accounts for any touch of mystery which may appear to shroud it. It

bestows a touch of vagueness on the type of knowledge under discussion. However, it does not detract from its normalcy in so far as an aesthetic experience is a perfectly normal human experience, e.g., any normal human being who is endowed with a certain level of sensitivity is capable of “enjoying” a beautiful sunset or an exquisite piece of painting, etc.

In this article I have confined myself to a study of the constitutive aspect of the mystic knowledge only, leaving out its epistemic significance as falling beyond its scope. Iqbal's chief contribution in this field, to my mind, is that he has brought his knowledge from the heavenly world of Plato down to the sublunary world of everyday life. He has shown that it is a kind of knowledge among other kinds and constitutively it is no different from other kinds of knowledge amenable to man. This, in my view, is a notable contribution of Iqbal in the fields of mysticism and the philosophy of religion.

Notes and Reference

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- ¹ Iqbal. Allama Muhammad. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Edited & Annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh, (Lahore Institute of Islamic Culture, 1986), p.12.
 - ² Ibid, p.11.
 - ³ Ibid, p.12
 - ⁴ Ibid
 - ⁵ Ibid
 - ⁶ Ibid, p. 13
 - ⁷ Ibid
 - ⁸ Ibid
 - ⁹ Ibid
 - ¹⁰ Ibid, p. 10
 - ¹¹ Ibid, pp. 10-11
 - ¹² Ibid, p. 17
 - ¹³ Ibid, p. 34
 - ¹⁴ According to al-farabi, the intellect rises from potential to the habitual intellect and thence to the acquired intellect where rational knowledge coincides with ecstasy and inspiration ef. his *Risala fi Ara Ahl al-Madinat al-Fadilah*, (Leiden, 1895), pp. 440.
 - ¹⁵ Iqbal, op. cit., p.5
 - ¹⁶ Ibid.
 - ¹⁷ Ibid, p. 4
 - ¹⁸ Ibid
 - ¹⁹ Ibid, pp.4-5
 - ²⁰ Ibid, p. 5
 - ²¹ Ibid

- 22 Ibid
23 Ibid
24 Ibid, p. 31
25 Ibid, p. 72
26 Ibid
27 Ibid, p. 72
28 Ibid, p. 73
29 An English rendering of Iqbal's work by M. Hadi Hussain, (Lahore: Sh. Ashraf, 1969), p.8.
30 An English rendering by A. J. Arberry, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 57. of Iqbal's work by M. Hadi Hussain, (Lahore: Sh. Ashraf, 1969), p.8.
31 Ibid, p. 58
32 Ibid
33 Iqbal, op. cit, p. 102
34 Persian Mathnavi rendered into English by A. J. Arberry, (London: John Murray, 1953). Iqbal's original mathnavi was published in 1917.
35 Iqbal, op. cit., p. 62
36 Ibid, pp. 156-57
37 Ibid, p. 157 (English version is Iqbal's own).
38 Ibid, p. 15