

Iqbal's View of Evolution

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Iqbal, like Bergson, rejects the mechanistic views of biological evolution which began with Charles Darwin. Darwin had explained evolution as the mechanical operation of natural selection on variations arising apparently, by chance.

J. R. Coahu has pointed out that natural selection cannot account for all organic evolution. He states: "Natural selection' is an unfortunate and most misleading word, and sounds as if Nature did this or that by a deliberate act of choice. Natural selection does nothing, produces nothing. Its effect is purely negative. All it means is that in the struggle for existence the weak go to the wall and do not survive ... 'Natural selection' can be called the 'occasion' or 'condition' of organic evolution, but certainly not its cause. All plant and animal variations are due to inherent energy in the organisms themselves." (*Vital Problems of Religion*, Edinburgh, 1914, pp. 52-53)

Iqbal considers the concepts employed by mechanists to be inadequate for the analysis of life and does not subscribe to the blind and dreary mechanism of struggle and destruction described by Darwin and Spencer. Iqbal, then, rejects Darwinism which forces into the strait jacket of physical concepts the dynamic processes of life, and by stressing that the future is determined completely by the past, repudiates the duration, freedom and creation which are found in real life. Furthermore, it throws no light on the ultimate nature of reality and does not admit the existence of a goal towards which evolution is progressing.

Iqbal believes in the "factual wholeness" of life described by the German biologist Driesch who maintains that there is an internal regulating principle within the organism which shapes it in the interest of the whole, guiding and moulding its purpose. Iqbal refers with approval to the theory of emergent evolution put forward by C. Lloyd Morgan: "Emergent evolution works upwards from matter, through life, to consciousness which attains in man its highest or supra-reflective level." (L. Morgan, *Emergent Evolution*, London, 1923, p. 297). It regards the emergence of the higher from the lower as being due to a driving force welling up from below and drawing upwards through activity. The emergent is an unforeseeable and novel fact in its own plane of being which cannot be explained mechanistically or resolved into that which has conditioned its birth and growth.

Like Bergson, Iqbal believes that it is consciousness or rather supra-consciousness that is at the origin of life. This consciousness is the need of creation. Bergson believes in a sort of cosmic vitalism in which the vital principle or *elan vital*, as he calls it, is life itself as it has endured through the ages and evolution is the history of the effort of life to free itself from the

domination of matter and to achieve self-consciousness. In other words, evolution is the outcome of an impulse of life manifesting itself in innumerable forms. For Iqbal, the function of consciousness is “to provide a luminous point in order to enlighten the forward rush of life. It is a case of tension, a state of self-concentration, by means of which life manages to shut out all memories and associations which have no bearing on our present action.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, 1962, p. 40). Like Bergson, Iqbal believes in the dynamic principle (whether it is called “soul”, “life”, “personality”, “consciousness” or whatever else) within organisms. It is to this principle “that we owe our eyes, ears, hands, feet, nerves, brain, our physical everything. It simply called all our organs into being in response to stimuli or prompting from the Reality outside itself, i.e., Nature which it wanted to interpret.” (*Vital Problems of Religion*, p. 54). Iqbal gives expression to this idea in his famous poem “*Saqi Nama*” (in *Bal-e-Jibril*, pp. 166-170) which contains most of his views on evolution.

Iqbal accepts Bergson’s biological approach to the problem of evolution but unlike Bergson he takes a teleological view of the evolutionary process. Bergson rejects teleology which he calls “inverted mechanism” since it pertains to development tied to the realization of predetermined ends. Therefore, according to Bergson, the vital urge to which emergence is due is both non-mechanical and non-teleological.

Lamarck’s explanation of evolution is teleological, postulating in organisms a striving or will to evolve. McDougall built up a whole system of animal and social psychology on the basis of teleological causation as opposed to mechanistic causation explaining animal and human actions in terms of inner drives tending towards some goal which satisfies the innermost being of the organism. Iqbal looks upon the creative urge not as mere blind will but essentially of the nature of thought and intelligence. Purpose holds a fundamental position in Iqbal’s concept of the evolution of life. It is born of desire or the will-to-live.

For Iqbal all the processes of assimilation, growth and reproduction are manifestations of Love. It is interesting to note that in “*Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*” (1932) Bergson, too, is prepared to call *elan vital* “love” which is either God or from God. As M. Siddiqi observes, Iqbal’s theory of Love is little else than a theory of intrinsic teleology operating from within the mind and spirit of a human being in the shape of instinctive desires. This type of causation does not dispense with the idea of God but God as conceived by the intrinsic teleologist is the creative principle of life, the guide who makes every organism conscious of its goal, implants in it the desire for the attainment of that goal.

Iqbal does not regard humanity as a mere episode in the huge evolutionary process. On the contrary, the whole cosmos is there to serve as the basis and ground for the emergence and perfection of the Ego. It is apparent from Iqbal’s poetry that he regards the advent of humanity on earth as a great and glorious event, not as an event signifying human sinfulness and degradation. For Iqbal, the “Fall” symbolizes a transition from “a primitive state of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience ... man’s

transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature with a throb of causality in one's own being."(*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 85). Adam's emergence marks that stage in evolution when simple and conative tendencies, native impulse, instincts and propensities are transformed into self-conscious behavior, purposive will and creative faculties. In his poem "*Taskhir-e Fitrat*" (in *Payam-e-Mashriq*, pp. 97-101), Iqbal points out that Adam though created out of matter rises to eminence and glory. He possesses immense powers by means of which he can invade both the visible and the non-visible. Humanity's evolution has, by no means, come to an end. A human being's destiny lies far beyond this world for he has to conquer worlds yet uncreated.

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