

# Iqbal and the Nature of the Universe

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For Iqbal the external world exists. In perception and in every other form of knowledge, there is the confronting "other." "The duality of subject and object is a necessity of all knowledge." (I. H. Enver, *Metaphysics of Iqbal*, p. 59). According to the old sciences there is presented in experience an external extended world, which exists in its own right independently of its appearance to the mind of the individual observer. This scientific approach leads to the materialistic world-view - "a void or expanse from which all objects may be abstracted but which itself is a homogeneous, immobile, continuous reality; a matter whose ultimate nature is undiscovered, possibly undiscoverable, but which is distributed unequally in masses in the expanse; and a duration or a lapse of time from which events may be abstracted and which is then itself a homogeneous, measurable, reality." (W. H. Carr, *The General Principle of Relativity*, p. 46).

Iqbal does not subscribe to such a world-view as regards his ideas on space and time. In his concept of matter also he differs from the materialistic and dualistic standpoint.

### **Descartes, Locke and Berkeley: Theory of Matter and its Refutation**

Iqbal disagrees with those physicists who hold that nature is material, made up of small, hard, inert, impenetrable, and indivisible physical entities called atoms of which objects are made, and existing in a void called space. According to Iqbal, this view is based on the attribution of substantiality to things. Iqbal points out that the scientific view of nature as pure materiality is associated with the Newtonian view of space as an absolute void in which all things are situated. However, "the criticism of the foundations of the mathematical sciences has fully disclosed that the hypothesis of a pure materiality, an enduring stuff situated in an absolute space is unworkable." (Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 34-35)

According to Descartes, matter meant simply corporeal form. Extension was the only attribute which was inseparable and indistinguishable from material substance. Every other attribute - color, weight, sonority, shape could be thought absent, but if we abstracted from its extension, material substance itself would be annihilated. Locke distinguishes between primary and secondary qualities of substance. Primary qualities are those "such as are utterly inseparable from the body, in what state so ever it be; such as in

all the alterations and changes it suffers...it constantly keeps; and such as sense constantly finds in every particle of matter which has bulk enough to be perceived (Locke, *Philosophical Works*, pp. 143-144). Primary qualities include solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number. Secondary qualities are nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities i.e. by the bulk, figure, texture, and motion of their insensible parts, as colors, sounds, tastes, etc." (*Ibid.*, p.144). In other words, primary qualities are objective, they exist whether anyone's senses perceive them or not, but secondary qualities are subjective.

Iqbal refers to Berkeley's refutation of the theory of matter as the unknown cause of our sensations. Berkeley pointed out that Locke's primary qualities were as subjective as his secondary qualities. The idea of extension and solidity obtained through the sense of touch is also a sensation in the mind. The idea of extension cannot be separated from the idea of color and other secondary qualities. One never perceived an extended thing which was not at the same time colored and so on. The primary qualities are inseparable united with the secondary. One could not abstract the latter and leave behind an extended substance, which is that and nothing else. Hence the subjective idealism of Berkeley refutes the theory of matter as the solid substratum underlying phenomenal reality and being the cause of our sensations.

Iqbal observes that on the basis of Locke's theory colors and sounds are nothing more than subjective states. He writes: "If physics constitutes a really coherent and genuine knowledge of perceptively known objects, the traditional theory of matter must be rejected for the obvious reason that it reduces the evidence of our senses on which alone the physicist as observer and experimenter, must rely to the mere impression of the observer's mind. Between Nature and the observe of Nature, the theory creates a gulf which he is compelled to bridge over by something occupying an absolute space like a thing in a receptacle and causing our sensations by some kind of impact. In the words of Prof. Whitehead, the theory reduces one half of nature to a 'dream' and the other half to a 'conjecture.' Thus physics, finding it necessary to criticize its own foundations has eventually found reason to break its own idol, and the empirical attitude which appeared to necessitate scientific materialism has finally ended in a revolt against matter." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 33)

Iqbal supports Berkeley in his rejection of Locke's theory of matter. However, unlike Berkeley, he does not deny the existence of the external world. There are times when he speaks in Berkeley's idealistic vein and seems to regard the world as being reducible to the self, i.e., as not existing in its own right:

Apart from our manifestation the world is nothing,  
for without us there would be no light and no sound.

(*Zabur-e-'Ajam*, p. 213)

but on whole this is not Iqbal's philosophical position. In his Lectures he says, "Since objects are not subjective states caused by something imperceptible called matter, they are genuine phenomena which constitutes the very substance of Nature and which we know as they are in Nature." *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 34)

### **Matter and Relativity**

Iqbal does not deny the existence of matter but he does deny its substantiality and in this he is supported by the theory of relativity which destroys, not the objectivity of nature, but the view of substance as simple location in space. He refers to Russell who has observed that the theory of relativity by merging time into space-time has damaged the traditional notion of substance more than all the arguments of the philosophers. The common-sense view of matter is something which persists in time and moves in space, but modern relativity-physics holds matter to be a system of inter-related events rather than a persistent thing with varying states. As Professor Whitehead points out about the new science, "in the place of the Aristotelian notion of the procession of forms, it has substituted the notion of the forms of process. It has swept away space and matter, and has substituted the study of the internal relations within complex state of activity." (A. N. Whitehead, *Nature and Life*, p. 27). In other words, the whole spatial universe has become a field of force or a field of incessant activity.

Thus, for Iqbal, Reality is not something inert of given. It is a process of becoming. He agrees with Professor Whitehead that "Nature is not a static fact situated in an a-dynamic void, but a structure of events possessing the character of a continuous creative flow which thought cuts up into isolated immobilities out of whose mutual relations arise the concepts of space and time." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 34)

### **Iqbal's Conception of Matter**

Iqbal describes Nature as an event rather than as a "thing." "What we call things are events in the continuity of Nature which thought spatializes and thus regards as mutually isolated for purposes of action. The universe which seems to us to be a collection

of things is not a solid stuff occupying a void. It is not a thing but an act." (*Ibid.*, p.51)

Matter exists but matter is not that which is "elementally incapable of evolving the synthesis we call life and mind and needing a transcendental Deity to impregnate it with the sentient and mental." (*Ibid.*, p. 106) Iqbal defines matter as "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." (*Ibid.*)

Like Bergson, Iqbal believes that an analysis of conscious experience throws light on the nature of matter, space and time. When we analyze our inner experience we find constant change and movement. "I pass from state to state. I am warm or cold, I am merry or sad. I work or I do nothing, I look at what is around me or I think of something else. Sensation, feelings, volitions, ideas - such are the changes into which my existence is divided and which color it in turns. I change, then, without ceasing." (H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 1) Now change of movement from one state to another takes place in time. On the analogy of the self it may now be maintained that the physical world too exists in time. Since time is a peculiar possession of a self, the world must also be regarded as a self or ego. (*Metaphysics of Iqbal*, p. 65) Thus, in Iqbal, as also in Whitehead, philosophy of nature becomes a philosophy of organism.

Like Leibniz and McTaggart, Iqbal believes that Reality is spiritual and consists of only selves or monads. According to Leibniz, a monad is a simple, unique, indissoluble substance. There is a hierarchy of monads some being superior to others in the clearness and distinctness with which they mirror the universe. The monads range from the completely active to the almost inert. No created monad is completely inactive and none is completely active, but those at the lowest end of the scale would be mere matter, if there were any such thing. God is the only completely active monad. Iqbal, too, believes in degrees of consciousness. "Ever atom of Divine energy, however low in the scale of existence, is an ego. But there are degrees on the expression of egohood. Throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of egohood until it reaches its perfection in man." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 71-72). There is, however, one significant difference between Iqbal's ego-unities and Leibniz's monads, namely, that Iqbal does not believe in the "windowlessness" of the monads. This "windowlessness" makes interaction of any kind between monads impossible and necessitates the assumption of some kind of "pre-established harmony" to explain how in fact the states of one monad synchronize with the states of the other monads and the actuality of perception. For Iqbal the ego is not a closed-off unit. He visualizes the life of an ego as "a kind of tension caused by the ego invading the environment and environment invading the ego. The ego does not stand outside this arena of mutual invasion." *Ibid.*,

p. 102)

For Iqbal, then, the universe is made up of ego-unities which are living, fluid and dynamic. They are in constant flux and any immobility and solidity which seems to exist is only an appearance. In the language of poetry

Immobility and rest are deceptions of the eye -  
each particle of the universe throbs with restlessness.

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 171)

Iqbal believes that we live in a growing universe which is “not an already completed product which left the hand of its maker ages ago, and is now lying stretched out in space as a dead mass of matter to which time does nothing, and consequently is nothing.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 52)

The question arises: can we conceive the universe as lacking deity? Iqbal’s answer is “By no means.” This is so because “the movement of life, as an organic growth, involves a progressive synthesis of its various stages. Without this synthesis it will cease to be an organic growth. It is determined by ends, and the presence of ends means that it is permeated by intelligence.” (*Ibid.*, p.52). At the level of cosmic unity Iqbal conceives this intelligence as Divine Ego or Ultimate Self.

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