

Iqbal as a Philosopher - A Vindication

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As a philosopher, Iqbal has won wider acceptance outside Pakistan than in Pakistan. Iqbal's position as a poet and as a political philosopher rests secure, but Iqbal the philosopher is still a long way from being generally recognized. The average literate person in Pakistan knows vaguely that Iqbal is a philosopher and probably also knows something about some of his concepts (such as the concept of "*Khudi*") but if one were to question him further, one would discover that to him the philosophizing of Iqbal is no different from the philosophizing of most other poets. Most poets tend to philosophize, he would say, and so does Iqbal. Perhaps he philosophizes a little more than the others - that is why he is known as a poet-philosopher.

Nor is this the view only of the lay person. During interviews with several post-graduate students who were reading Iqbal's philosophy as a part of their M.A. syllabus, the present writer learnt (with profound amazement) that most of them did not consider Iqbal a philosopher at all. Their opinion was based on one common idea - that there is no system in Iqbal's thinking. Some of them attributed this lack of system to the fact that Iqbal had not written a "text-book" of philosophy. It is rather surprising that Iqbal's Lectures - which, incidentally, are read by few other than students of philosophy - are not considered by many to be a philosophical work. It is undeniable that the Lectures are hard to understand. The arguments very often do not follow a logical order and are not laid out systematically. There are frequent repetitions and digressions. Nonetheless, the Lectures are a major contribution to world philosophy. But even if it is conceded that they do not constitute a "text-book" of philosophy, or disregarded altogether, Iqbal - on the strength of his poetry alone - would still qualify for the title of a philosopher. There are, after all, as many different varieties of philosophers as there are of poets. All poets do not write in rhymed verse; all philosophers do not write "text-books."

But the general idea - that there is no system in Iqbal's thinking - must be considered carefully because (in the present writer's opinion) it is the chief obstacle in the way of Iqbal's recognition as a philosopher. This idea is based on the assumption that every philosopher has a philosophic system. One may concede the validity of this assumption since random philosophizing, however brilliant, does not make a philosopher. There must be discernible in the thinking of a philosopher, at least the outlines of a structure formed by his most important ideas and concepts. The question "Is Iqbal a philosopher?" can, then, be resolved into the question "Does Iqbal have a philosophic system?"

It is not possible to say precisely why so many readers of Iqbal - including students of philosophy - should fail to see any method in his thinking. It is possible to suggest several answers. Perhaps the two most important causes or reasons for the

widely-prevalent opinion that Iqbal has no philosophic system are: (a) his prominence as a poet and as a political figure; (b) the fundamental opposition between poetry and philosophy.

To a considerable extent Iqbal's prominence as a poet and as a political figure obscures his importance as a philosopher. Compared with a poet, a philosopher's appeal is naturally far more limited. Many more people read Keats than read Kant. Furthermore when one has grown up believing Iqbal to be first and foremost, a poet - as most Pakistanis have done - it is not always easy to see him as a philosopher. Coleridge, for instance, was also a metaphysician, but to most people he is simply a poet.

Not only does Iqbal the poet but also Iqbal the spiritual founder of Pakistan stands in the light of Iqbal the philosopher. The political circumstances of his time had, of course, a considerable influence on his philosophy. But Iqbal was essentially a philosopher and not a politician though he participated in politics. As he himself admitted, his interest in politics was only secondary. However Iqbal the political leader often gains precedence over Iqbal the philosopher. A politician's actions and utterances are determined, to a large extent, by motives of political expediency. His philosophy, in other words, is derived from his politics. But in Iqbal's case, his political views are derived from his philosophy. If this distinction is not clearly made; it is not possible to arrive at a fair estimate of Iqbal as a philosopher (particularly as a political philosopher).

Something also needs to be said about the opposition between poetry and philosophy. A number of people have difficulty in accepting as philosophy what is written in the form of poetry. By its very nature, poetry working through symbols avoids statement and prefers suggestion, whereas philosophy dealing with logical categories and concepts, demands preciseness in thought and expression. Therefore, in a sense, a poet-philosopher is a paradox. But this paradox finds its basis in human nature itself. There is, in human beings, a straining both towards, and away from, definition of thought and feeling. This psychological phenomenon has found different expressions and outlets at different times in the history of literature and philosophy. Sometimes it has led to poetry becoming philosophical, as in the case of the metaphysical poets, sometimes to philosophy becoming poetical, as in the case of Nietzsche, sometimes to a complete bifurcation between poetry and philosophy (the quarrel between the poet and the philosopher being an ancient one), sometimes to a joining of poetry and philosophy, as in the case of mystic-metaphysicians such as 'Attar and Rumi, and also as in the case of Iqbal.

Iqbal's philosophical system is not something "given." It has to be constructed from a number of philosophical ideas which appear in his prose and poetical writings. In one sense, Iqbal's thought consists not of one but of several systems, since he has dealt with and made contributions to many different branches of philosophy, i.e. epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of religion, aesthetics and political philosophy. However, the thread of some central ideas and concepts runs through these various systems and links them into a larger whole.

For Iqbal the fundamental fact of human life is the absolute and irrefutable consciousness of his own being. The purpose of life is the development of the Self. In order to achieve this purpose, a human being needs to have knowledge both of himself and the eternal world. He gains such knowledge by means of sense perception, reason and intuition.

Starting with the intuition of the Self, a human being becomes aware of the Not-Self, the confronting “other” which provides a constant challenge for him. Nature, however, does not confront God in the same way as it confronts humankind, since it is a phase of God’s consciousness. God is immanent since God comprehends the whole universe, but God is also transcendent since God is not identical with the created world. All life is individual. There is a gradually rising scale of egohood running from the almost-inert to God who is the Ultimate Ego. God is not immobile nor is the universe a fixed product. God is constantly creative and dynamic and the process of creation still goes on. The Qur’anic saying “Towards God is thy limit” (Surah 53:43) gives Iqbal an infinite world-view, and he applies it to every aspect of the life of humankind and the universe.

Corresponding to the two aspects of the Self - the efficient and the appreciative - are the two levels of time. As a human being perfects his egohood, he casts off the girdle of serial time and gains a measure of eternity. Human beings are the chosen of God (Surah 20:14) but they must pass through many trials and tribulations before they qualify for the vicegerency of God. To the Traveller on the Path, Iqbal says:

Don't think that you are perfect; for you are
Still in the making: you complete one stage
And go on to the next, imperfect all
The time. To reach no end, to travel on
Without a stop is everlasting life.

(*Zabur-e-‘Ajam*, p. 231, translation by Hadi Husain)

As E. M. Forster observes, Iqbal believes in “the Self as a fighting unit” (*Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 296). Humanity’s mission on earth is to win for itself greater freedom and to gain immortality by fortifying its personality. The quest of a human being is not to become God or superman but to become a human being. “True religion,” says R.G. Collingwood, “lies not in making God in our images but in making ourselves in God’s Image.” (*Concerning Prayer*, p.74.) The tradition, “Create in yourself the attributes of God” is the watch-word of Iqbal’s thought.

Though humanity is the pivot around which Iqbal’s philosophy revolves, yet “his revaluation of man is not that of man qua man, but of man in relation to God” (A. M. Schimmel : *Gabriel’s Wing*, p. 382). His Ideal Person is the Servant of God. The relation between a human being and God is a personal one hence the great importance of prayer in

Iqbal's thought. By means of prayer, a human being attains the "me'raj" (Ascension) whereby his Self finds solace and strength. The belief in the One Living God gives him freedom from all false deities and arms him against all forces of disintegration. Iqbal has also worked out the social implications of prayer and the principle of "*Tauhid*." The Prophet of Islam is the Perfect Man par excellence in whose life Iqbal sees enacted all the principles dearest to his heart.

In Iqbal's viewpoint, "Art, religion and ethics must be judged from the standpoint of personality" (quoted by R.A. Nicholson in Introduction to *The Secrets of the Self*, p. xxii). That which strengthens the Self is good, that which weakens it is bad. Iqbal does not admit the absolute existence of evil, but regards it as being necessary for the actualization of moral purpose as vital activity in the world. His Iblis is the counterpart of his Ideal Person.

The emphasis on "prophetic" consciousness which is so pronounced in Iqbal's thought, is especially so in his aesthetics. The purpose of all "true" art is to enhance and enrich life. Of himself Iqbal said in a moment of self-appraisal

I spent myself that there might be more light,
More loveliness, more joy for other men

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 96, translation by A.J. Arberry).

Iqbal is, in fact, understating the case. The role played by him - and by the prophetic poet of his philosophy of Art - is not just to add "more light, more loveliness, more joy" to the life of human beings but to inspire them to rare feats of action and heroism.

One of the most important questions to be asked regarding Iqbal's work as a philosopher is: from what point of view is it to be judged? Inevitably the work of every philosopher must be subjected to the test of coherence and consistency. On the whole, Iqbal's philosophy sustains this test. Like any other philosopher he has first principles which seem to him self-evident and which he, therefore, does not seek to defend. Like most other philosophers, there are times and places where he is not very clear or is evasive and unwilling to commit himself. Many writers have also seen a number of contradictions in his thought, but most of those contradictions (which appear in some specific part of his thought - usually is his socio-political philosophy) disappear when viewed in the larger context of his total philosophy.

However, the final criterion by which Iqbal's philosophy is to be judged is not truth - but workability. As a writer says, "It is as an activist, a 'practical philosopher,' that Iqbal should be judged" (M. D. Taseer: *Introduction to Poems from Iqbal*, p. 13). Iqbal's idea that "the essential nature of man...consists in will, not intellect or understanding" (*Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, p. 35) links him with the voluntaristic - pragmatic tradition in Western thought. His philosophy is essentially a philosophy of action - not an

enquiry into truth but how the actual business of living should be carried on. The unmistakable message of his writings is:

Seek not the world-revealing up,
Seek the world-conquering hand alone!

(*Zabur-e-Ajam*, p. 162, translation by A. J. Arberry)

Iqbal who was always concerned “prophet-like, father-like, with the fate of the people” (P. Avery: “Iqbal and the Message of Persian Metaphysics”) believed that every thought and deed must be judged by the life-value that it may possess.” (*Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*, p. 116.) With Fichte he would have said, “We philosophize out of need of our redemption” and not merely to arrive at some abstract truth which has no bearing on life. R. Harre is perfectly correct in saying that the question to be asked of a system such as Iqbal’s is “Not ‘Is it true or acceptable?’ but ‘Could I live by it?’” (Iqbal: “A Reformer of Islamic Philosophy”).

Iqbal, then, is to be judged not as philosophers are often judged - entirely or largely by the canons of logic - but as the prophet of a new age, “a new world of thought and feeling, a world vibrant with hope and high endeavor” (A. J. Arberry: Preface to *Persian Psalms*, p. viii).

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