

The Concept of Time in Iqbal's Thought

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Time is a central concept in Iqbal's philosophy. From various accounts we know that the tradition "*la tasubbu ad-dahr*" i.e., "Do not vilify Time" (for Time is God), accompanied Iqbal all his life.¹ He even surprised Henri Bergson with it when he visited the French philosopher in Paris. "He took this prophetic word for a designation of that over-whelming reality of which time and space are only aspects."² In 1933, Iqbal wrote, "If *dahr* is continuous and extended and if it is Allah himself - what then, is space? Just as if time is a kind of reflection on *dahr*, so space must also be a kind of reflection of *dahr*."³ He emphasizes time more than space. Time is more fundamental than space, it is related to space as soul is to the body. It is the mind of space.⁴ Pure duration is the matrix of the whole universe.⁵

Newton: Absolute Time

Newton conceives of time as he conceives of space, as a kind of actually subsisting framework in which objects are set, and so as belonging to the actual in the same fashion for every kind of individual observer, however he may observe and without reference to any condition.⁶ According to Newton, all motions may be accelerated or retarded, only the flow of absolute time cannot be changed. The same duration with the same persistence occurs in the existence of all things, whether the motion be rapid, slow or zero.⁷ Iqbal refers to Newton's description of time as "something which in itself and from its own nature flows equally" and says that the metaphor of stream implied in this description suggests serious objections to Newton's view of time. "We cannot understand how a thing is affected on its immersion in this stream and how it differs from things that do not participate in its flow. Nor can we form any idea of the beginning, the end, and the boundaries of time if we try to understand it on the analogy of a stream. Moreover, if flow, movement, or 'passage' is the last word as to the nature of time, there must be another time to time the movement of the first time, and another which times the second time, and so on to infinity."⁸ Thus, according to Iqbal the notion of time as something wholly objective is beset with difficulties.

The Ash'arites: Atomic Time

Time, though it cannot be regarded as objective, is not to be regarded as

something unreal. Iqbal also admits that although we possess no sense-organ to perceive time, it is a kind of flow, and as such has a genuine objective or atomic aspect.⁹ Modern quantum theory which assumes the discontinuity of matter, confirms the Ash'arite theory of atomic time. Iqbal quotes Professor Rongier in support: "Contrary to the ancient adage, Nature *non facit saltus*, it becomes apparent that the universe varies by sudden jumps and not by imperceptible degrees. A physical system is capable of only a finite number of distinct states. Since between two different and immediately consecutive states the world remains motionless, time is suspended, so that time itself is discontinuous: there is an atom of time."¹⁰ According to the Ash'arites then, time is a succession of individual "nows." It follows that between moments of time there is an unoccupied moment of time or a void of time.¹¹ Iqbal finds the idea of atomic time unsatisfactory.¹² This idea is due to the ignorance or neglect of the psychologically subjective aspect of time and considers time almost as a created, objectively given fact, whereas a personal, living Creator is posited. Now if this Creator is living, one must somehow be able to predicate a time of Him.¹³

In Iqbal's words, "we cannot apply atomic time to God and conceive Him as a life in the making, as Professor Alexander seems to have done in his lectures on *Space, Time and Deity*."¹⁴ A better understanding of Divine Time can be obtained through introspection, seizing that experience of appreciative time which alone can account for creativeness. In this way, time precedes space psychologically, and is the source of space.¹⁵

Time and Relativity

Iqbal is in general agreement with the theory of relativity as regards the concepts of space and time but he raises one objection to it. He thinks that Einstein's theory considers time to be unreal. "A theory which takes time to be a kind of fourth dimension of space must, it seems, regard the future as something already given, as indubitably fixed as the past. Time as a free creative movement has no meaning for the theory. It does not pass, events do not happen; we simply meet them."¹⁶

According to an eminent mathematician, Iqbal has a mis-conception about the theory of relativity which regards time as a fourth dimension, not of space, but of the space-time continuum. Thus the theory gives as much reality to time as to space.¹⁷ It is to be pointed out that Iqbal did not presume to understand all the implications of the theory of relativity, since he was not a mathematician. He

recognized that “It is not possible,” he said, “for us laymen to understand what is the real nature of Einstein’s time.”¹⁸

Ouspensky : Time as the Fourth Dimension of Space

Iqbal objects to the conception of time held by the Russian writer Ouspensky in his book *Tertium Organum*.¹⁹ Ouspensky regards time as a fourth dimension of space and conceives the fourth dimension to be the movement of a three-dimensional figure in a direction not contained in itself. Just as the movement of the point, the line and the surface in a direction not contained in them gives us the ordinary three dimensions of space, in the same way the movement of the three dimensional figure in a direction not contained in itself must give us the fourth dimension of space. And since time is the distance separating events in order of succession and binding them in different wholes, it is obviously a distance lying in a direction not contained in the three-dimensional space. It is perpendicular to all directions of three-dimensional space and is not parallel to any of them. Ouspensky describes our time-sense as a misty space-sense and argues that our psychic constitution is such, that to one-dimensional, two-dimensional or three-dimensional beings the higher dimension always appears as succession in time.²⁰ In other words, what appears to us as time is really space. This means that time is not a genuine creative movement, and what we call future events are not fresh happenings but things already given and located in an unknown space. Iqbal points out that in his search for a fresh direction Ouspensky needed a real serial time, i.e. a distance separating events in the order of succession. Thus time which was viewed as succession, at one stage, is reduced, at another stage, to what does not differ in anything from other lines and dimensions of space.²¹ Ouspensky regarded time as a genuinely new direction in space because of its serial character. If it is divested of this character, in Iqbal’s opinion it cannot be regarded as an original direction.²² Iqbal has another objection to Ouspensky’s viewpoint. Razi-ud-Din Siddiqi writes, “Iqbal is right when he objects to the theory of serial time put forward by Ouspensky ... that on the basis of this theory, it would be possible, by a careful choice of the velocities of the observer and the system in which a given set of events is happening, to make the effect precede the cause.”²³ “It appears to me,” writes Iqbal, “that time regarded as a fourth dimension of space really ceases to be time.”²⁴

Time as Relative: Dawani and ‘Iraqi

Mulla Jalal-ud-Din Dawani and ‘Iraqi take a relativistic view of time.

According to the former if we take time to be kind of span which makes possible the appearance of events as a moving procession and conceive this span to be a unity, then we cannot but describe it as an original state of Divine activity, encompassing all the succeeding states of that activity. Dawani adds that a deeper insight into the nature of succession reveals its relativity, so that it disappears in the case of God to whom all events are present in a single act of perception.²⁵

Iqbal finds "Iraqi's view of time even more satisfactory."²⁶ "Iraqi conceives of infinite varieties of time, relative to the level of being intervening between materiality and pure spirituality. The time of gross bodies may be divided into past, present and future, and until one day is over the succeeding day does not come. The time of immaterial beings also possesses a serial character but its passage is such that a whole year in the time of gross bodies is not more than a day in the time of an immaterial being. Rising to the highest level we reach Divine time which is absolutely free of the quality of passage, and does not admit of divisibility, sequence and change. It is above eternity, having neither beginning nor end. The priority of God is not due to the priority of time; on the other hand, the priority of time is due to God's priority. The Qur'an describes Divine time as the "Mother of Books" in which the whole of history freed from causal sequence, is gathered up in a single super-eternal "now."²⁷

Iqbal's conception of "time in God" differs even from 'Iraqi's viewpoint, being based on psychological experience unknown to the Muslim philosophers.²⁸ According to 'Iraqi's conception of Divine Time, divine knowledge is the same as "omniscience in the sense of a single indivisible act of perception which makes God immediately aware of the entire sweep of history regarded as an order of specific events, in an eternal 'now'."²⁹ Iqbal does not hesitate "to carry the robust anthropomorphic conception of God in the Qur'an to its farthest consequences, denying God this 'passive omniscience' of traditional theology."³⁰ He says, "By conceiving God's knowledge as a kind of reflecting mirror, we no doubt save His foreknowledge of future events, but it is obvious we do so at the expense of His freedom. The future certainly pre-exists in the organic whole of God's creative life, but it pre-exists as an open possibility, not as a fixed order of events with definite outlines."³¹

Razi and the Debate on Time

For Iqbal, Fakhruddin Razi sums up the debate on time in Muslim thought with a declaration of scepticism concerning the real nature .of time.³² Razi's book

is mainly explanatory.³³ This does not surprise Iqbal since Razi's method was, on the whole, objective, and "a purely objective point of view is only partially helpful in our understanding of the nature of time. The right course is a careful psychological analysis of our conscious experience which alone reveals the true nature of time."³⁴

McTaggart : The Unreality of Time

Iqbal refers to J. E. McTaggart's argument relating to the unreality of Time. According to McTaggart, time is unreal because every event is past, present and future, "past, present and future are incompatible determinations. Every event must be one or the other, but no event can be more than one ... But every event has them all. If M is past, it has been present and future. If it is future, it will be present and past. If it is present, it has been future and will be past. Thus all the three incompatible terms are predicable of each event, which is obviously inconsistent with their being incompatible, and inconsistent with their producing change."³⁵ To illustrate the point let take a concrete example. Queen Anne's death is past to us, it was present to her contemporaries and future to William III. Thus the event of Queen Anne's death combines characteristics which are incompatible with each other.³⁶

In Iqbal's opinion, McTaggart's argument proceeds on the assumption that serial time is final. "If we regard past, present, and future as essential to time, then we picture time as a straight line, part of which we have travelled and left behind, and part lies yet untravelled before us. This is taking time, not as a living creative movement, but as a static absolute holding the ordered multiplicity of fully-shaped cosmic events, revealing serially, like the picture of a film, to the outside observer."³⁷ Iqbal refers to C.D. Broad who points out that a future event cannot be characterized as an event. Before the death of Queen Anne the event of her death existed only as an unrealized possibility.³⁸ Iqbal's answer to McTaggart's argument is that the future exists only as an open possibility and not as a reality. When an event is described as being both past and present it cannot be said to combine incompatible characteristics.³⁹ "The fallacy is in regarding 'E is occurring now' as analyzable in a way similar to the analysis of 'X is red': not only is 'now' regarded as a quality like 'red', but a confusion is made between E, an event, and X, a substance."⁴⁰ Iqbal states that when an event X does happen it enters into an unalterable relation with all the events that have happened before it. These relations are not at all affected by relation of X with other events which happen after X by the further becoming of Reality. Hence there is no logical

difficulty in regarding an event as both past and present.⁴¹ Iqbal admits, however, that McTaggart's argument "requires much further thinking" even though it does not touch real time or pure duration to which the distinction of past, present and future do not apply.⁴²

Nietzsche : Cyclic Time

Iqbal criticizes Nietzsche's view of time as it appears in connection with his doctrine of Eternal Recurrence.⁴³ In the third book of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche introduces the theme of Eternal Recurrence. This doctrine states "that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us."⁴⁴ So for Nietzsche "everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being."⁴⁵ Whatever is happening now will happen again and has happened before. The great things of the world recur, but so do the small. The return is "not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life in the greatest things and in the smallest."⁴⁶

According to Nietzsche, time is not a subjective form; it is a real and infinite process which can only be conceived as "periodic."⁴⁷ On the principle of the conservation of energy the quantity of energy in the universe is constant. The world is a closed-off unity in which there can be no dissipation of energy. The amount of energy being fixed, various combinations of energy-centres recur an infinite number of times.⁴⁸ Time is thus pictured by Nietzsche as repeating itself in identical cycles. It has no beginning or end. Iqbal regards Nietzsche's viewpoint as a kind of mechanism based on the hypothetical constancy of quantity of energy.⁴⁹ According to Iqbal, Nietzsche does not "seriously grapple with the question of time. He takes it objectively and regards it merely as an infinite series of events returning to itself over and over again."⁵⁰

Iqbal points out the difference between Nietzsche's concept of time and his own concept as described in *Asrar-e Khudi*. Life to Nietzsche is repetition, to *Asrar-e Khudi* creation. The perfection of the Perfect Person according to Islam consists in realizing this aspect of time which can be described only as the eternal "now." To Nietzsche there is no such thing as the eternal "now."⁵¹

Ibn Khaldun : Time as Movement

Iqbal commends the work of the Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun who broke

away from the Magian conception of time as a circular movement and regarded the historical process as a free creative movement and not as a process which had already been worked out with definite landmarks.⁵² This view has been put forward with greater accuracy in modern times by Bergson.⁵³ Bergson “linked the solution of the problem of time with such vital problems as liberty and personality, thus forestalling Iqbal’s active valuation of time as a sword. Iqbal corrects Bergson in a theistic sense, pointing to a direction that Bergson himself was eventually to follow in the course of his religious evolution.”⁵⁴

Bergson: Serial and Non-Serial Time

In his view of time, Iqbal comes nearest to Bergson. He pointed out that “among the representatives of contemporary thought Bergson is the only thinker who has made a keen study of the phenomenon of duration in time.”⁵⁵ Bergson uses “time” in two senses. In its narrow or superficial sense it means spatialized or clock time.⁵⁶ In its wider or real sense it is conceived as “*duree*” which is not mere blank lastingness, enduring through a hypostatized, spatialized Time it is ceaseless, continuous flow in which all things live and move and have their being.⁵⁷ Like Heraclitus Bergson insists that the notion of ceaseless change is fundamental, but unlike him he does not stultify the notion by permitting cyclic repetition. For him, *duree* evolves ever new and newer forms, that is, it is genuinely creative.⁵⁸

Like Bergson, Iqbal distinguishes between the serial and non-serial aspects of time. The former is associated with what Iqbal calls the efficient self and the latter with the appreciative self. The efficient or practical self is related to the spatial world. While retaining its unity as a totality, the efficient self reveals itself as a series of discrete (quantum) states. The time of this efficient self is just a dimension of the space-time continuum. It is of the serial character postulated by the Ash‘arites.⁵⁹ The time in which the efficient self lives is the time of which we predicate “long” and “short.” It is hardly distinguishable from space. Time, thus regarded, is not true time, according to Bergson.⁶⁰ The appreciative ego lives in pure duration. i.e., change without succession. According to Iqbal, the unity of the appreciative ego is like the unity, of the germ in which the experiences of its ancestors exist, not as a plurality, but as a unity in which every experience permeates the whole. There is no numerical distinctness of states in the totality of the age, the multiplicity of whose elements is wholly qualitative. There is change and movement but they are not divisible. Their elements inter-penetrate and are wholly non-serial in character. The time of the appreciative self is a single “now”

which the efficient self spatializes into a series of “nows.”⁶¹

Bergson also points out the difference between time as infected by the idea of space and pure time: “When we speak of time we generally think of a homogeneous medium in which our conscious states are ranged alongside one another as in space, so as to form a discrete multiplicity. Would not time, thus understood, be to the multiplicity of our psychic states what intensity is to certain of them - a sign, a symbol, absolutely distinct from true duration? Let us ask consciousness to isolate itself from the external world, and, by a vigorous effort of abstraction, to become itself again. We shall then put this question to it: does the multiplicity of our conscious states bear the slightest resemblance to the multiplicity of the units of a number? Has true duration anything to do with space? ... if time as the reflective consciousness represents it, is a medium in which our conscious states form a discrete series so as to admit of being counted, and if on the other hand our conception of number ends in spreading out in space everything which can be directly counted, it is to be presumed that time, understood in the sense of a medium in which we make distinctions and count, is nothing but space ... it follows that pure duration must be something different.”⁶² It has been pointed out that Bergson does not deny succession to pure duration. For him the flow of pure duration is a succession of interpenetrating states. Iqbal takes away succession altogether. For him pure duration is eternity in the sense of change without succession.⁶³

Bergson: Pure Duration Known Intuitively

Iqbal agrees with Bergson that pure duration is known intuitively rather than intellectually.⁶⁴ Bergson points out the barrenness and artificiality of intellectual abstraction which cannot perceive the organic unity of life. “Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshot, as it were, of the passing reality.”⁶⁵ Bergson’s distinction between intellect and intuition, like Iqbal’s, is in alignment with his distinction between spatialized time and *duree*. In “*Gulshan-e Raz-e-Jadid*” Iqbal says:

یکی از گبرودار او هزار است	ابد داعقل ما ناسازگار است
نبیند مغز و دل بر پوست دارد	چونگه است او سکون را دوست دارد
تمیز ثابت و سیاره کردیم	حقیقت را چو ما صد باره کردیم
چو زناری زمان را بر میان بست	خرد در لامکان طرح مکان بست
موسال و شب و روز آفریدم	زمان را در ضمیر خود ندیدم

(Zabur-e-'Ajam, p. 216)

Unable to perceive infinity,
 The intellect just multiplies pure unity.
 Lame, it likes to stand still;
 And blind, give up the kernel for the shell.
 Are fragments of reality -
 Creations of the intellect
 Which must dissect.
 We never saw Time with our inner sight
 And have invented year and month and day and night.

(Translation by Husain, H., "The New Rose-Garden of Mystery," p.7)

and again he comments upon the inadequacy of the intellectual approach to the question of time:

خرد بهر ابد طرفی ندادد	نفس چون سوزنی ساعت شمارد
تراشد روزها، شبها، سحرها	نگیرد شعله و جنبد شردها

(Zabur-e-'Ajam, p. 229)

The Intellect counts every breath
 With a clock's hand,
 As if breath were Time's unit
 So it can never comprehend
 And take the measure of Infinity.
 It only fashions night and day,
 Imaginary parts of Time.
 Afraid to seize the flame,
 It gathers sparks alone.

(Translation by Husain, H., "The New Rose-Garden of Mystery," p.13)

Iqbal compares the intuitive and the intellectual mode of perceiving reality:

ضمير زندگانی جاودانیست به چشم ظاهرش بینی زمانی ست

(Zabur- e-'Ajam, p. 228)

Life's essence is eternal, thought

Seen with the body's eye

It is a part of Time

(Translated by Husain, H., "The New Rose-Garden of Mystery," p. 13)

Thus for Iqbal, it is "only in the moments of profound meditation when the efficient self is in abeyance, that we sink into deeper self and reach the inner centre of experience."⁶⁶ However, it is to be remembered here that Iqbal does not agree with Bergson in thinking that thought only spatializes living processes. For him, in its deeper movement, that is "in its true nature," thought "is identical with life."⁶⁷

Bergson: Time as Creative

Iqbal shares with enthusiasm an idea found both in the Qur'an and in Bergson's philosophy, namely, that time is creative, Bergson vehemently opposed the old idea expressed in *Ecclesiastes* that "there is nothing new under the sun."⁶⁸ On the contrary, he urges, that if we picture duration as a ceaseless flow, we are bound to hold some kind of an evolutionary view in conjunction with it. Time is not static, it is a process continually working towards ever new forms which cannot be predicted.⁶⁹ Bergson takes the example of a painter. "The painter is before his canvas, the colours are on the palette, the model is sitting - all this we see, and also we know the painter's style: do we foresee clearly what will appear on the canvas? We possess the elements of the problem: we know in an abstract way, how it will be solved, for the portrait will surely resemble the model and will surely resemble also the artist; but the concrete solution brings with it that unforeseeable nothing which is everything in a work of art."⁷⁰

According to Bergson, "science can work only on what is supposed to repeat itself - that is to say, on what is withdrawn, by hypothesis, from the action of real time"⁷¹ and thus "concentrated on that which repeats, solely preoccupied in

welding the same to the same, intellect turns away from the vision of time.”⁷² Iqbal also points out that creation and not repetition is the characteristic of real time. “If time is real, and not a mere repetition of homogeneous moments which makes conscious experience a delusion, then every moment in the life of reality is original, giving birth to what is absolutely novel and unforeseeable. To exist in real time is not to be bound by the fetters of serial time, but to create if from moment to moment and to be absolutely free and original in creation - creation is opposed to repetition which is characteristic of mechanical action. That is why it is impossible to explain the creative activity of life in terms of mechanism.”⁷³

Bergson: Time as Non-Teleological Movement

Despite the many similarities between the thought of Bergson and Iqbal, there are certain significant differences. Bergson denies the teleological character of Reality on the ground that it makes time unreal. According to him “the portals of the future must remain wide open to Reality” otherwise it will not be free and creative.⁷⁴ Thus if teleology is admitted the primordial freshness of *duree* will be nullified. Iqbal points out that this objection only holds good so long as teleology means the acting out of a plan in view of a pre-determined purpose. As A. Bausani observes, “such a religious predestinationism would destroy the freedom of both God and man.”⁷⁵ Teleology is to be understood not as a mechanical but as a vitalistic-creative process - a line not already drawn, but a line in the drawing - an actualization of open possibilities. The world-process “is purposive only in this sense that it is selective in character and brings itself to some sort of present fulfilment by actively preserving the supplementing the past.”⁷⁶ For Iqbal, then, ultimate Reality “is pure duration in which thought, life and purpose interpenetrate to form an organic unity.”⁷⁷ In his opinion Bergson’s mistake was that he overlooked the forward-looking aspect of consciousness which makes it teleological.⁷⁸

According to Iqbal, Bergson was wrong in that he considered pure time as preceding the Person, of whom alone both pure duration and *elan vital* can be predicated.⁷⁹ Pure time cannot keep the multiplicity of objects and events together. The multiplicity of nature broken up into innumerable instants can only be grasped by the appreciative act of a lasting self which can build it up together in a lasting synthesis.⁸⁰ For Iqbal, time although an essential element in reality, is not reality itself.⁸¹ In Greek and Hindu thought time was bound to things visible and escape from it was possible only through self-annihilation, but Iqbal boldly introduces Time into the very heart of God.⁸² God is not the unmoved mover, the

God portrayed by the Qur'an is an active, changing and living God.⁸³ For Iqbal, God lives in eternity and in serial time. The former means change without succession while the latter is organically related to eternity in so far as it is a measure of eternity.⁸⁴

In *Javid Nama* Iqbal attempts to portray life in the non-serial time of the world beyond creation:

با نهادم در جهان بی‌جهات	در گذشتم از حد این کائنات
فارغ از لیل و نهار است این جهان	بی‌بین و بی‌سار است این جهان
اصل او از کن فکان دیگری	اندر آن عالم جهان دیگری
ناید اندر وهم و آید در نظر	لازوال و هر زمان نوع دگر
هر زمان او را جمال دیگری	هر زمان او را کمال دیگری
گنجد اندر ساحت او نه سپهر	روزگارش بی‌نیاز از ماه و مهر

(*Javid Nama*, pp 178-180)

I passed beyond the bounds of this universe
 And set foot in the undimensioned world,
 A world without both right and left,
 A world devoid of night and day.
 In that universe was another world
 Whose origin was from Divine fiat,
 Undecaying, and every moment transformed,
 Unimaginable, yet there clearly visible,
 Every moment clothed in a new perfection,
 Every moment clad in a new beauty.
 Its time had no need of moon and sun;
 In its expanse the nine spheres are contained.

(Translation by Arberry, A. J., *Javid Nama*, pp.113-114)

The Qur'an and the Two Aspects of Time

Serial time comes into existence only by the very act of creation:⁸⁵ “The Time of the Ultimate Ego is revealed as change without succession, i.e., an organic whole which appears atomic because of the creative movement of the ego. This is

what Mir Damad and Mulla Baqir mean when they say that time is born with the act of creation by which the Ultimate Ego realizes and measures, so to speak, the infinite wealth of His own undetermined possibilities.”⁸⁶ Hence it is possible for Iqbal to interpret logically the two contrasting statements on creation in the Qur’an: “All things have we created bound by a fixed decree and Our command is no more than a single word, like the twinkling of an eye”(Surah 54:50)⁸⁷ “and do thou trust in Him who liveth and dieth not; and celebrate His praise who hath created the heavens and the earth, and whatever is between them, in six days; and then ascended His Throne; the Merciful.”(Surah 25:60)⁸⁸ Viewed intellectually, one Divine day in the terminology of the Qur’an and the Old Testament becomes equal to a thousand years. But from another view-point, the process of creation is a single act as swift as the twinkling of an eye. Iqbal illustrates this point further. The sensation of red is caused by a wave-motion of the frequency of 400 billions per second and is practically incalculable, yet it is received by the eye in a single momentary act of perception.⁸⁹

Time: To Sum Up

Iqbal believed that “a keen sense of the reality of time and the concept of life as a continuous movement in time is typical of Islam.”⁹⁰ He attaches pivotal importance to time in his own philosophy. His concept of time “fits in nicely into the general movement of revival of personalism which is underway in today’s religious philosophy.”⁹¹ Bausani observes, “Iqbal’s own contribution is that of Islamic experience, which we would do well to consider with greater attention and appreciation.”⁹² A. M. Schimmel thinks that the religious importance of Iqbal’s ideas about time deserves special attention, for “what he wanted was surely not to add a new system of scientific explanations to this most difficult problem, but to draw the attention of the Muslim world back to the contact with the living God. Through a reevaluation of the two-fold aspect of time he aimed at an actualization of this burning but long forgotten issue for Muslim religious life.”⁹³

Time (and Space) in Iqbal’s Poetry

In his poetry, Iqbal often describes serial time as the *Zunnar*, the magian’s girdle. This symbol “shows Iqbal’s fine psychological insight he could not yet foresee what H. Corbin proved many years later that the *Zunnar* is the typical Zarvanistic symbol.”⁹⁴ Zarvan is the old Iranian God of Time. He is conceived as a sorcerer whose spell has to be broken. The person of God recognizing the

personal creative activity of God, and realizing this power in his own self can break the spell of Zarvan by participating in God's time.⁹⁵

Most of Iqbal's ideas on time are brought together in "*Nawa-e Waqt*," a poem "which has been praised by Dr. Razi-ud-Din Siddiqi, Pakistan's well known authority on atom-physics, as a perfect commentary on Einstein's theory of relativity."⁹⁶ It is worth quoting in full:

خورشید به دامانم انجم به گریبانم
در من نگری هیچم، در خود نگری جانم
در شهر و بیابانم در کاخ و شبستانم
من دردم و درمانم، من عیش فراوانم
من تیغ جهان -وزم من چشمه حیوانم
چنگیزی و تیموری مثنی ز غبار من
هنگامه افرنگی یک جسته شرار من
انسان و جهان او از نقش و نگار من
خون جگر مردان سامان بهار من
من آتش سوزانم من روضه رضوانم
آسوده و سیارم این طرفه تماشایین
در باده امروزم کیفیت فردا بین
پنهان به ضمیر من صد عالم رعنائین
صد کوکب غلطان بین صد گنبد خضرائین
من کسوت انسانم، پیراهن یزدانم
تقدیر فسون من، تدبیر فسون تو
تو عاشق لیلائی من دشت جنون تو
چون روح روان پاکم از چندو چگون تو
تو راز درون من من راز درون تو
از جان تو پیدایم در جان تو پنهانم
من رهرو و تو منزل، من مزرع و تو حاصل
تو ساز صد آهنگی، تو گرمی این محفل
آواره آب و گل؛ درباب مقام دل
گنجیده به جامی بین این قلمز بی حاصل
از موج بلند تو سر بر زده طوفانم

(*Payam-e -Mashriq*, pp. 102-103)

In my bosom I hold the sun and the stars,
If you look within me, I am nothing, if you look within yourself,
I am life itself.

My dwelling-place are cities and deserts, places and solitary dens.
 I am malady and pain, I am the balm and limitless joy;
 I am the world-vanquishing sword, I am the fountain of eternal life.
 Changez and Temur raised but specks of my storm,
 The turmoil of the West is but a spark of my fire.
 Humankind and its universe are my handiwork,
 From the labour of great men, my spring is born.
 I am the fire of hell and the peace of heaven.
 See this wondrous phenomenon - I am still, yet I move
 In the crystal ball of my present see the glimpse of future days.
 See hidden in me a thousand glorious worlds,
 Thousands of swift-moving stars and thousands of blue skies
 I am the garment of humanity, and God I behold,
 My spell is destiny, freewill is your chant,
 You love a Laila I am the wilderness where you roam so wildly.
 Like the soul I am free of your how and wherefore,
 You are the secret of my being and I of yours.
 In your soul I am hidden, out of your soul I arise.
 I am the traveller and you the destination, I the field and you the harvest.
 You are the glow and the music of the gatherings.
 O wanderer on sea and land, return to your heart;
 See in a cup an ocean without bounds,
 You are the lofty wave from which my storm arose.

Space and Time are not absolute realities, says Iqbal:

چشم بگشا بر زمان و بر مکان این دو يك حال است از احوال جان

(*Javid Nama*, p. 19)

Open wide your eyes upon Time and Space,
 For these two are but a state of the soul.

(Translation by Arberry, A .J., *Javid Nama*, p.33)

Serial time is related to - in fact, it derives its reality from - pure duration:

ایک زمانے کی رو جس میں نہ دن ہے نہ رات!

تیرے شب و روز کی اور حقیقت ہے کیا

(Bal-e-Jibril, p. 127)

What other sense have your nights, what have your days, but one
Long blank current of time empty of sunset or dawn?

(Translation by Kiernan, V. G., *Poems from Iqbal*, p.38)

In his Lectures on *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal said, “timeless experience embodies itself in a world-making or world-shaking act and in this form diffuses itself in the time-movement and makes itself effectively visible to the eye of history.”⁹⁷ He repeats this thought again in his famous poem on the Mosque of Cordoba - the Essence reveals its possibilities in a tangible form in serial time:

سلسلہ روز و شب اصل حیات و ممات
جس سے بناتی ہے ذات اپنی قبائلی صفات
جس سے دکھاتی ہے ذات زیر وہ ممکنات

سلسلہ روز و شب نقشگر حادثات
سلسلہ روز و شب تار حریر دو رنگ
سلسلہ روز و شب ساز ازل کی فغان

(Bal-e-Jibril, p. 126)

Day succeeding to night - moulder of all time's works.
Day succeeding to night - fountain of life and of death.
Chain of the days and nights - two-coloured thread of silk
Woven by Him that is, into His being's robe.
Chain of the days and nights - sigh of eternity's harp.
Height and depth of all things possible, God-revealed.

(Translation by Kiernan, V.G., *Poems from Iqbal*, p.37)

Space and time are brought into existence by the very act of creation and are then broken into moments:⁹⁸

مری صراحی سے قطرہ قطرہ نئی حوادث ٹپک رہے ہیں
میں اپنی تسبیح روز و شب کاشمار کرتا ہوں دانہ دانہ

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 175)

New tidings slowly come drop by drop from my pitcher gurgling of time's
new sights,
As I count over the beads strung out on my threaded rosary of days and
nights.

(Translation by Kiernan, V. G.. *Poems from Iqbal*, p. 50)

In *Javid Nama*, Zarvan the God of serial time, instructs the adept how to
conquer him and how to read the Eternal Now:⁹⁹

من حساب و دوزخ و فردوس و حور	من حیاتم من مماتم من نشود
عالم شش روزه فرزند من است	آدم و افرشته در بند من است
ام هر چیزی که می بینی منم	هر گلی کز شاخ میچینی منم
از دم هر لحظه پیر است این جهان	در طلسم من اسیر است این جهان
آن جوانمردی طلسم من شکست	لی مع الله هر که را در دل نشست
لی مع اله باز خوان از عین جان	گر تو خواهی من نباشم در میان

(*Javid Nama*, p. 22)

I am life, I am death, I am resurrection,
I am the Judgment, Hell, Heaven and Houris,
Man and angel are both in bondage to me,
This transitory world is my own child;
I am every rose that you pluck from the branch,
I am the matrix of everything that you see.
This world is a prisoner in my talisman,
Every moment it ages through my breath.
But he who has in his heart 'I have a time with God',
That doughty hero has broken my talisman;
If you wish that I should not be in the midst,
Recite from the depths of your soul "I have a time with God."

(Translation by Arberry, A. J., *Javid Nama*, p.34)

The Prophet's saying "*li ma'a Allah waqt*," i.e.. "I have a time with God
(where even Gabriel has no access) has become, in more or less explicit form, a

leitmotif of Iqbal's whole thinking, beginning from the *Asrar*.¹⁰⁰ Many mystics have expressed their unitive experiences through this tradition.¹⁰¹ Maulana Rumi has quoted it several times, and many mystics have built upon it a whole edifice of mystical meaning of the word "*waqt*" as Hujwiri sums up: "*Waqt* is that whereby a man becomes independent of the past and the future... he has no memory of the past and no thought of that which is not yet come."¹⁰²

In a section of *Asrar-e-Khudi* entitled "Time is a sword," Iqbal gave his first detailed exposition of the concept of time. He wanted to make it clear that "that world of time is not to be regarded as a world of shadows signifying nothing, a play of illusion on the edge of a void as the Hindu mystagogues had preached. Time is real and time is important."¹⁰³ Time becomes a cutting sword:

من چه گویم سر این شمشیر چیست	آب او سرمایه‌دار از زندگیست
ساحبش بالاتر از امید و بیم	دست او بیضا تر از دست کلیم

(*Asrar-e-Khudi*, p. 80)

How shall I say what is the secret of this sword?
In its flashing edge there is life.
Its owner is exalted above hope and fear,
His hand is whiter than the hand of Moses.

(Translation by Nicholson, R.A., *The Secrets of the Self*, p.134)

To he who is bound by serial time, the poet says:

ای اسیر دوش و فردا درنگر	در دل خود عالم دیگر نگر
در گل خود تخم ظلمت کاشتی	وقت را مثل خطی پنداشتی
باز با پیمانۀ لیل و نهار	فکر تو پیمود طول روزگار
ملمسی آزاد این زناز باش	شمع بزم ملت احرار باش
تو که از اصل زمان آگه نئی	از حیات جاودان آگه نئی
زندگی از دهر و دهر از زندگیست	لاتسبوالدهر فرمان نبیست

(*Asrar-e-Khudi*, pp 81-82)

Look O thou enthralled by Yesterday and Tomorrow,
 Behold another world in thine own heart.
 Thou hast sown the seed of darkness in thy clay,
 Thou hast imagined Time as a line:
 Thy thought measures length of Time
 With the measure of night and day,
 Art thou a Moslem? Then cast off this girdle.
 Be a candle to the feast of the religion of the free.
 Knowing not the origin of Time,
 Thou art ignorant of everlasting Life.
 Life is of Time, and Time is of Life:
 “Do not abuse Time” was the command of the Prophet.

(Translation by Nicholson, R. A., *The Secrets of the Self*, pp.135-138)

The mystic Hujwiri also refers to Time as a sword which “cuts the root of the future and the past, and obliterates care of yesterday and tomorrow from the heart. The sword is a dangerous companion: either it makes its master a king or it destroys him.”¹⁰⁴ For Iqbal, to live in pure duration is to be at the centre of destiny.¹⁰⁵ “It is time regarded as an organic whole that the Qur’an describes as ‘*Taqdir*’ or the destiny.”¹⁰⁶ By participating in God’s time, a human being is no longer the vehicle of serial time, he is the rider of the mount:

ایام کامرکب نہیں - راکب ہے قلندر

(*Zarb-e Kalim*, p. 36)

The “*qalandar*” is not the mount of time but the rider of the mount.

Real life is possible only “on this still point of time”:

تو از شمار نفس زندهئی نمیدانی که زندگی به شکست طلسم ایام است

(*Zabur-e-‘Ajam*, p. 93)

All thy life is breath to take,
 Knowing not, frail man,

That true living is to break
The days' talisman.

(Translation by Arberry, A. J., *Persian Psalms*, p.58)

From “There is no God but God” too Iqbal infers that a human being must free himself from the bondage of serial time through Love:

اعتبار از لا اله داریم ما هر دو عالم را نگه داریم ما
از غم امروز و فردا رسته‌ایم با کسی عهد محبت بسته‌ایم

(*Asrar-e-Khudi*, p. 85)

We have honour from “There is no God but Allah,”
We are the protectors of the universe.
Freed from the vexation of today and tomorrow,
We have pledged ourselves to love One.

(Translation by Nicholson, R.A., *The Secrets of the Self*, p.140)

Love also frees a human being from the limitations of the intellect:

خرد هوئی ہے زمان و مکان کی زنجاری نہ ہے زمان نہ مکان لا الہ الا اللہ

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 7)

Intellect is the bondage of time and space,
there is no time or space, nothing but “There is no God but God.”

Iqbal refers to the highly personal character of the experience of time by quoting the story of the Seven Sleepers (Surah 18:19)¹⁰⁷

مہ وصالت نمی‌ارزد بہ یک جو بہ حرف د کم لبثتم ، غوطہ زن شو

(*Zabur-e-‘Ajam*, p. 216)

Your months and years are meaningless and vain:
Think over the Qur'an's "How long did you remain?"

(Translation by Husain, H., "The New Rose-Garden of Mystery," p.7)

Iqbal does not tire of saying:

حساب روزش از دور فلک نیست

(Zabur-e-'Ajam, p. 237)

The Self's day is not measured by
The revolutions of the sky.

(Translation by Husain, H., "The New Rose-Garden of Mystery")

or of stressing the importance of Love through which the soul is freed from the
bondage of time, and led to the "me'raj" or the Ascension, to pure duration:

نماندی که حسابش ز سالو ماهی نیست

(Payam-e-Mashriq, p. 219)

The reckoning of which is not by years or months.

and so in unforgettable lines Iqbal gives a message based on his life-long
philosophy:

ستاروں سے آگے جہان اور بھی ہیں	ابھی عشق کے امتحان اور بھی ہیں !
قناعت نہ کر عالم رنگ و بو پر	چمن اور بھی آشیان اور بھی ہیں !
اسی روز و شب میں الجھ کر نہ رہ جا	کہ تیرے زمان و مکان اور بھی ہیں !

(Bal-e-Jibril, pp. 89-90)

There are yet other words beyond the stars
there are yet other tests of love to come.

With this world of hue and scent be not content
for there are other gardens, too, to see.
Be not entangled in this Day and Night,
there are other times and spaces, too, for you.

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