

Iqbal's Philosophy of *Khudi*

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Throughout history, prophets, poets and philosophers have appeared to remind human beings of their true nature — a nature that consists of a temporal as well as a heavenly element. They have attempted to rekindle in the human beings the Divine Spark which is an integral part of their makeup. Speaking of this Divine Spark, the Qur'an notes that when Allah (SWT) created the first human being, He breathed His own spirit into this new creation (Al-Hijr 15:29 & Al-Sajdah 32:9). Consequently, human nature is not "human," it is a "humanness" that has an element of the Divine in it. But after having been created "in the best conformation" (Al-Teen 95:4), the human being was reduced "to the lowest of the low" (Al-Teen 95:5). The question now arises as to whether the human individual can again rise to the original noble heights at which he/she was created. In the twentieth century, no Muslim thinker has delved into the depths of this issue more perceptively than the great poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938). Iqbal formulated his philosophy of *khudi* in order to express his ideas on this subject. The following quatrain illustrates the motive underlying his spiritual and intellectual endeavors as well as the essential core of his philosophy:

Why should I ask the sages about my
beginning?

It is my ultimate destiny that I am really
concerned about.

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Elevate your *khudi* to such heights that
before every decree,
God Himself asks you: "Tell me, what is your
wish?"

Iqbal's philosophy essentially revolves around the issue of the progression of human being, or the rise of the "self" or "ego" — the Iqbalian *khudi* — in the direction of attaining exalted heights — the heights at which Almighty Allah (SWT) Himself begins to take the wishes, hopes, and aspirations of the human being into account before formulating His decree.

Iqbal argues that *khudi* is the root of all existence, an entity which may appear to be perishable but which can attain immortality. The human ego or "I" has the potential of achieving permanence as an element in the constitution of the universe provided that it adopts a certain mode of life. The ego can evolve, progress, and succeed as well as degenerate, atrophy, and fail. The Qur'an puts these two possibilities as follows: "The one who causes this (self) to grow in purity has indeed attained success; and the one who is negligent of this (self) has indeed utterly failed." (Al-Shams 91:9,10). The human ego has the ability to grow by absorbing the elements of the universe, of which it appears to be an insignificant part, as well as the ability to incorporate the attributes of Allah (SWT). Muslim Sufis have advised: Create in yourselves the attributes of Allah. If the human ego is able to do this, it would become worthy of being the vicegerent of God on earth. Iqbal argues that the human ego has a central place in the universe, while it is, at the same time, intimately linked with the Ultimate Ego, or God Himself. Iqbal notes,

....throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of egohood until it reaches perfection in man. That is why the Qur'an declares the Ultimate Ego to be nearer to man than his own neck-vein.¹

In order to reach these noble heights of

perfection, the ego has to pass through three stages which Iqbal describes in *Asrar-e-Khudi*. These three stages can be seen as the different spiritual phases through which the ego has to pass in its journey of spiritual ascension:

- *Ita'at*, or obedience to the Divine Law;
- *Dabt-e-Nafs*, or self-control, which is the highest form of self-consciousness or ego-hood;
- *Niyabat-e-Ilahi*, or the vicegerency of God.

Even though these three stages in the spiritual progression of the human ego superficially resemble Nietzsche's three stages of the metamorphosis of the spirit, they are not the same. In fact, Iqbal himself deemed it "necessary to warn the reader of *Asrar-i-Khudi* that Nietzsche does not at all believe in the spiritual fact which I have described as *khudi*...."² The fact that Nietzsche does not even accept the reality of the human ego is itself the most pressing evidence that the three stages in the development of the Iqbalian *khudi* are not identical with the three stages in the development of the Nietzschean spirit. Nietzsche argues that the human "I" is a fiction and Iqbal accepts the argument that this is indeed the case if the issue is viewed from a purely intellectual standpoint. This position of Nietzsche echoes the Kantian argument in *The Critique of Pure Reason* that the notions of God, immortality, and freedom cannot be proven on intellectual grounds, however useful such notions may be for practical purposes. But Iqbal goes on to note that the existence of the "I" cannot be rejected just because it cannot be proven on intellectual grounds because the human ego is not a purely intellectual entity — its existence is also rooted in inner experiences. Bradley (1846-1924) has also noted that when one moves beyond the constraints of purely intellectual thought, and views the issue from the perspective of "inner experience," the "I" is no longer a fiction but an indubitable fact. Iqbal notes that Leibnitz, in asserting

that the "I" is an ultimate fact, was closer to the truth than either Kant or Nietzsche. But Leibnitz regarded the human ego as something closed or windowless. Iqbal, however, notes that this assertion is contradicted by our experience in which the "I" can grow and evolve through the process of education. In light of this, the most pressing question for Iqbal is not whether the human ego is a reality or not — it most certainly is a reality — but whether this weak, created, and dependent ego or "I" can survive the shock of death and thus become a permanent element in the constitution of universe. As Iqbal argues in *Asrar-e-Khudi*, the human ego can attain immortality if it adopts a certain way of life through which it can come into contact with the Ultimate Source of existence, the Ultimate Ego.

Since attaining permanence depends upon perfecting the self and bringing it in accord with the Divine Will, Iqbal appropriately exhorts that one should "know" his or her inner self. "Know thyself" is an exhortation that has been made numerous times before by many others; the problem is not in the exhortation itself but in its approach. According to Iqbal, all distinctly philosophical problems have ultimate solution in the self, but, unfortunately, it is this very self which is still ignored. The reason underlying the ignorance of the self is the fact that the self is thought of as being a material entity. But the human being is not only a material being, he/she also possesses a non-material component. Iqbal says that "the unity called man is body when you look at it as acting in regard to what we call the external world; it is mind or soul when you look at it as acting in regard to the ultimate aim and ideal to such setting."³ In other words, there is an element in the composition of the human being that manifests itself and experiences reality quite differently from the bodily element of the human composition — this non-corporeal element is the human soul. Together, the body and soul exist as a unit. Thus, the Iqbalian "self" is an entity in

which the body and the soul have to work together. Both have to grow together and have to work harmoniously if the personality of an individual is to be strengthened. The body and the soul are indispensable for the needs of each other, as Iqbal notes:

...the body is not a thing situated in an absolute void; it is a system of events or acts. The system of experiences we call soul or ego is also a system of acts. This does not obliterate the distinction of soul and body; it only brings them closer to each other. The characteristic of the ego is spontaneity; the acts composing the body repeat themselves. The body is accumulated action or habit of the soul; and as such undetachable from it.

Iqbal expresses the same point in a couplet:

To name body and soul separately is the requirement of speech.
But to see (or know) body and soul as separate entities is heresy.

According to Iqbal, the soul is that element in the constitution of the human being that can be explained only in the sense that it is a Divine Spark in the human being:

The ambiance of the Divine Light is shrouded within this very (body of) clay,
O you heedless person! You are much more than a sentient being!

Modern secular thought has lost all cognizance of this Divine Spark. The ignorance of this spiritual reality has led to the degeneration of the human being to sub-human levels of existence, notwithstanding the many scientific, technological, and economic accomplishments. Le Comte Du Noüy ends his book *Human Destiny* with the these words:

And let him [man] above all never forget that the divine spark is in him, and in him alone, and that he is free

to disregard it, or to come closer to God by showing eagerness to work with Him and for Him.⁵

When the human being forgets this Spark of Divinity within, he/she falls prey to the false sense of personal liberty — a liberty which, in reality, is the worst form of slavery. Having lost sight of the Divine Spark within, the human being inevitably loses sight of all higher moral and ethical principles and, as a consequence, his/her life becomes totally subservient to the animal instincts of bodily flesh. As a result of neglecting the awareness and realization of the Divinity within, the Divine Spark fades away and eventually it is extinguished altogether. This leads to an unbalanced life in which the individual exists only as an animal, a *Homo sapiens*, and loses all sense of his/her humanity. The following observation by Le Comte Du Noüy takes on added significance in light of these facts:

Man must liberate himself from a bondage which is normal for animals and therefore evil for him. The soul of man demands a complete mastery over the flesh.⁶

The Age of Enlightenment, the subsequent Industrial Revolution, and the succeeding era of Marx, Darwin, and Freud, as well as of others like them, appear to be milestones in the evolution of human thought. But these and other such milestones signify progress and development in only a limited sense — the progress and development of technological and mechanical culture. In spite of the claims that humanity has "progressed" immensely during the modern age, the reality is that moral and spiritual development have been virtually static while technological and mechanical development has been proceeding vigorously. As a matter of fact, much of the technological and material advancement has taken place at the expense of moral and spiritual values. The modern secular society has become spellbound by all this material development, without recognizing the inherent destructive tendency vis-à-vis moral and

spiritual values that this development entails. All "progress" has come to be measured in purely materialist and Darwinian terms but, as the following observation highlights, this definition of "progress" has nothing to do with ethics and spirituality. Professor R.M. MacIver notes in his book *Society*:

We should not define social evolution as though it meant or implied progress. How far we find a correspondence between the direction of social evolution and the direction prescribed by our particular concept of social progress is another matter. We may properly enquire into the relationship between the two. But it is possible to do so only if we define social evolution in ethically neutral terms.⁷

Having rendered the human being incapable of moral self-assessment, modern secular thought has become the greatest contemporary hurdle to human spiritual progress, because it makes the human being unconscious of the true nature of human reality as well as the true nature of the reality of the universe. The fatal flaw, the greatest misfortune of modern secular science, philosophy, and art is that they have become totally lopsided — totally focused on the material dimension of reality and oblivious to its spiritual dimension. Consequently, it is no surprise that not only has the human being not progressed spiritually during the modern period, but more tragically the human being's moral and spiritual faculties have become numb and practically dysfunctional. However, even though the spiritual faculties have become dormant, they are not dead altogether. These faculties are waiting for the time when human beings would recognize the importance of these inner capacities and decide to re-appropriate them so that they can play their rightful role in the reconstruction of humanity. For the time being though, modern thought has come to rely exclusively on science (or a philosophy that is the handmaiden of science) in its search for "objective" knowledge. But, as a matter

of fact, neither science nor philosophy is by itself capable of reaching the truly "objective" knowledge regarding the actual nature of reality and the actual reality of the human being. Speaking about the limitations of science in the human quest for knowledge, Iqbal notes:

Natural Science deals with matter, with life, and with mind; but the moment you ask the question how matter, life, and mind are mutually related, you begin to see the sectional character of the various sciences that deal with them and the inability of these sciences, taken singly, to furnish a complete answer to your question. In fact, the various natural sciences are like so many vultures falling on the dead body of Nature, and each running away with a piece of its flesh.... Natural Science is by nature sectional; it cannot, if it is true to its own nature and function, set up its theory as a complete view of Reality.⁸

Whereas the limitation of science is that it is by nature "sectional," the limitation of philosophy is of a similar nature:

Philosophy is an intellectual view of things; and, as such, does not care to go beyond a concept which can reduce all the rich variety of experience to a system. It sees Reality from a distance as it were.⁹

Because of the obvious limitations of science and philosophy, it is equally obvious that the human being cannot truly realize his/her humanity if the individual is left to depend upon his/her physical and mental capabilities alone. In other words, the human ego, the Iqbalian *khudi*, cannot fulfill its true potential if the individual avails him/herself only of the resources of science and philosophy. For Iqbal it is only religion that can provide us with the intimate and holistic knowledge of Reality — the type of knowledge that is an essential prerequisite for the realization of our humanity. Iqbal argues:

[Philosophy] is theory... [Religion] is living experience, association, intimacy. In order to achieve this intimacy thought must rise higher than itself, and find its fulfillment in an attitude of mind which religion describes as prayer — one of the last words on the lips of the Prophet of Islam.¹⁰

This attitude of mind, though only in its most developed and highest form, is the theistic counterpart of Nietzsche's atheistic *will to power*. Of course, the *will* is essential if one is to overcome the temptations of an immoral life, as demanded by religion. However, the *will* without the support of *belief* in something higher and more sublime cannot withstand the pull towards carnality and corruption.

Khudi requires the coupling of *will to power* and *belief*, eventually realizing itself in the form of *yaqeen* or a deep inner conviction. In fact, it is undaunted conviction that serves as the pivotal point for the "self" to act and react to the sensual temptations of life. However, this conviction will not actualize itself unless the individual understands that his/her life has a purpose, and that this purpose has an individual as well as a collective dimension. The evolution and ascension of the ego is not merely a detached, personal, and individual event — this spiritual development has a collective dimension too that cannot be ignored. Iqbal notes that a great deal of sacrifice and benevolence is required on the part of a person in order to bring the individual, self-preserving ego in harmony with the collective ego. Consequently, the guiding principle in life cannot be one of conflict between the "self" and other "selves" if the dynamic process of the development of *khudi* is to take place. This process can only unfold if there is conscious realization of the tension between the individual and collective dimensions, a consciousness which in turn enables the individual personality to balance this

tension. Iqbal defines "personality" as being this very state of tension, which, if not maintained, will cause indolence to set in, short-circuiting *khudi's* process of development. The process of self-realization requires tension to be present, as tension is the well-spring of dynamism. The human being's complete freedom from the limitations of the material world — and from materialism itself — is contingent upon the maintenance of this tension. In essence, the human being's aspiration to achieve perfection necessarily requires the achievement of a balance between the individual ego and the collective ego. In Iqbal's words:

The life of the ego is a kind of tension caused by the ego invading the environment and the environment invading the ego. The ego does not stand outside this arena of mutual invasion. It is present in it as a directive energy and is formed and disciplined by its own experiences.¹¹

This constant interaction between the individual ego and the environment provides the ideal opportunity for self-evaluation. As the individual interacts with her/his environment, he/she must be constantly assessing his/her own "self" not only on an individual basis but also in relation to other "selves" in the environment. But one should not lose sight of the fact that the initial emphasis is on the individual ego. Only that individual ego which has attained a degree of self-realization and self-understanding will be able to genuinely understand and constructively engage with other individual egos. This is another way of saying that only that ego which has learned self-respect, self-love, and self-affirmation will be able to extend respect and love to other selves, and also affirm their dignity and autonomy. Iqbal's philosophy of *khudi* posits that a mature and developed understanding of respect, love, and affirmation on the part of individual ego requires respect, love, and affirmation for every other "self" because only that individual ego which is genuinely

integrated with its environment and constructively engaged with other egos is really a conscious self.

In the context of Iqbal's philosophy, then, the progress of the individual human being depends on his/her relationship to the self, to the family, to the society, and ultimately to God. The gradual realization of this intricate and delicate web of relations will lead the individual to realize his/her fullest potential and significance. Ultimately, with the rise of ego-hood on Iqbalian terms, the individual can become the architect of human destiny. It is worth repeating the quatrain that was cited in the beginning regarding the motivation and essence of Iqbal's intellectual and spiritual quest:

Why should I ask the sages regarding my origin?

It is my ultimate destiny that I am really concerned about.

Elevate your *khudi* to such heights that before every decree

God Himself asks you: "Tell me, what is your wish?"

Endnotes

1. Iqbal, Allama Muhammad., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Edited by M.S. Sheikh. (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1986) p. 57.
2. Iqbal, Allama Muhammad., "Note on Neitzsche" in *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*. Edited by S. A. Vahid (Lahore: Ashraf Printing Press, 1922) p. 238.
3. *Reconstruction.*, Ibid., p. 122.
4. Ibid., p. 84.
5. Du Noüy, Le Compt., *Human Destiny* (1956) p. 369.
6. Ibid., p. 109.
7. MecIver, R. M., *Society* (London:Macmillan, 1953) p. 530.

8. *Reconstruction*, Ibid., p. 33-34.
9. Ibid., p. 49.
10. Ibid., p. 49.
11. Ibid., p. 82.

According to a tradition reported by Muadh Ibn Jabal (RAA) and narrated by Imam Ahmad (RA), Muadh (RAA) asked Allah's Messenger (SAW) as to which faith is excellent. He said: That you love (any person or thing) for the sake of Allah, hate for the sake of Allah, and that you keep your tongue busy in the remembrance of Allah. He said: Allah's Messenger (SAW), is there anything besides this? He said: You like for the people what you like for yourself, and you dislike for them what you dislike for yourself.

According to a tradition reported by Abdullah Ibn Amr Ibn Al-'As (RAA) and narrated by Imam Bayhaqi (RA), Allah's Messenger (SAW) said: Which people's faith please you most? On receiving the reply that they were the angels he said: But why should they not believe when they are with their Lord? It was suggested that they were the prophets, to which he replied: Why should they not believe when revelation comes to them? The people suggested themselves and he said,: Why should you not believe when I am among you? Allah's Messenger (SAW) then said: The people whose faith pleases me most are people who will come after my time who will find sheets containing a Book in whose contents they will believe.