

The Philosophy of the Self in Muhammad Iqbal *

İLYAS ALTUNER 
İğdır University

Research Article

Submitted: 02.11.2022 | Accepted: 29.11.2022

Abstract: Muhammad Iqbal sees each person as the “self” with an independent identity, and God as the “Absolute Self”. The human experience of the self is a constantly changing experience. This change develops around a center and eventually forms an organic unity. The independence of the self does not mean that it is closed to other selves. It is wrong to see the essence of the self as an unchanging substance or to conceive it as an unstable flow. According to Iqbal, the real personality of man is not a “thing” but an “action”, a “sum of behaviors”. The human being at the highest level of self-consciousness is the only being among all creatures capable of consciously participating in the creative life of the Creator.

Keywords: Muhammad Iqbal, the self, Absolute Self, existence, continuous creation, finite, infinite.

* This paper is the translation of the proceeding presented orally in the *International Workshop on Religious Sciences* at İğdır University, on December 30th, 2017.

Muhammad Iqbal's thought constitutes a philosophy of self in itself. The self, which is centered in the philosophies of the self, is the place where the essence of everything is determined in Iqbal; that is, everything is a free self with separate identities, and God is the Absolute Self. It is natural to think that every being has an ego that comes out of this thought. Iqbal attributes self to all atoms and filters everything through self-thought. It is seen that the main factor that caused the idea of self to settle on the basis of Iqbal's philosophy was the atomism of the Ash'ari kalam, in particular, Bakillani's atomic idea.¹ What impressed Iqbal is based on the idea that the universe consists of fissile atoms. Trying to show the continuity of God's creation and that there is no end to atoms, Iqbal argues that the universe is constantly expanding with each new atom.²

The atomic theory, which had a strong impression on Iqbal, replaced chaos with the idea of the cosmos. Iqbal observed that the opposites in the universe do not constitute chaos, on the contrary, the universe is the cosmos because of the harmony between the opposites. This cosmos is not the result of coincidence, but the product of free and creative action arising from consciousness, which also exists hidden in the self of the universe.³

Descartes, the founder of modern philosophy, was the person who seriously placed the idea of self at the foundation of philosophy. However, the conscious self, which Descartes argues, is hidden not in the universe, but in the mind of the man himself.⁴ Although both ideas seem to be similar, Iqbal generally follows a path from the universe to man, while Descartes follows a path from

¹ Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 64-5.

² Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 65.

³ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 76.

⁴ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham & Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), II, 19. [Hereinafter will be given the abbreviation CSM]

man to the universe. It is fact that the starting point of both thinkers is the phenomenon of God. Because Descartes also accepts God as the Absolute Self, just like Iqbal, and shapes his philosophy accordingly. Western personalist philosophers have thus taken up the concept of consciousness as the intersubjective relation of the self.

While the minds descend from the highest mind to the lowest one in relation to each other in Muslim philosophers, for Iqbal the selves rise from the bottom up and end in the Absolute Self. The self-closest to the Absolute Self is the human, and it seems that the reason for such a ranking is competence.⁵ The self, which is described as the human self here, is actually the same as the mind, which al-Fārābī describes as *al'aql al-mustafād* (the *acquired* or *habitual intellect*), and the faculty that Aristotle calls *habitus*.⁶

Iqbal bases his creation theory on the idea of “continuous creation” on the conception of the *Infinite Will* of the Ash‘arites.⁷ Although this is insufficient, he states that it is more accurate than Aristotle’s view of the *static universe* and is closer to the Qur’an than him.⁸ Iqbal, who attributed the continuous existence of the universe to the Supreme Self’s constant opening of itself in different degrees of consciousness, made it clear that it did not accept the classical creation theory by replacing a static universe with a

⁵ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 68-9. He also wrote the following lines about the self. See Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self (Asrār-i Khudī): A Philosophical Poem*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Macmillan & Co., 1920), 16.

The form of existence is an effect of the Self,
Whatsoever thou seest is a secret of the Self.
When the Self awoke to consciousness,
It revealed the universe of Thought.

⁶ Aristotle uses the concept of “habitus” in the sense of property. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 983b13. On al-Fārābī’s concept of “habitual intellect”, see al-Fārābī, *Risāla fī al-‘Aql*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1983), 20-4.

⁷ For Iqbal’s explanations on the reaction of the Ash‘arite school against rationalism, see Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia: A Contribution to the History of Muslim Philosophy* (London: Luzac & Co., 1908), 65-80.

⁸ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 66-7.

continuous universe and tried to put forward a new theory.⁹

In fact, this idea ultimately derives its source from the Qur'an, because there are verses in it that state that the universe is always evolving and changing, and that there is continuity in creation. Creation and change are continuous, and emanation is continuous. Iqbal believes that God is in a mutual relationship with man, arguing that the relationship between God and the universe is not mechanical, but rather organic. However, as to how such a relationship can exist between the Absolute Self and the finite self, Iqbal says that change is not important.¹⁰ Thus, he shows that he does not give importance to the thoughts that the interrelated selves undergo change, which are advocated by humanist philosophies.

Indeed, Iqbal also spoke of change in a sense, but according to him, even if the finite self-changes from competence to incompetence or vice versa, the Absolute Self changes entirely within the framework of competence. This is no problem for the competence of God. To claim that the Absolute Self has not changed means to admit that it is stationary. This idea of a *stationary essence*, which is seen in Aristotle and Ibn Hazm, one of the important theologians of the Islamic world, is a thought that restricts the competence of the Creative Self.¹¹ However, the creative field of the Absolute Self is infinite, and its actions are as wide as possible.¹²

Iqbal's statement that all reality is the Absolute Self means that finite selves have no realities, which is a semi-pantheistic idea. The Real Infinite does not exclude the finite in such a way but includes it.¹³ It is wrong to consider Iqbal a pantheist because of this thought. For he states that the finite self can achieve perfection in its relationship with the Infinite Self by preserving its own finite self, and pantheistic mysticism cannot accept this. The Real

⁹ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 48.

¹⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 56-8.

¹¹ Aristotle said that the first mover must be a static being in order to be an eternal being, substance and actuality. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a25.

¹² Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 57.

¹³ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 56-7.

Infinite consists of density, not an extension, and according to him, the finite self is seen as separate, although not separate from the Infinite Self.¹⁴ It can be said that this thought of Iqbal is an effort to reconcile between the theologians, who see God and the universe, that is, the Infinite and the finite, as separate, and the Sufis, who see them as the same. Iqbal says that the continuity of life is not a right, that eternal life will be achieved as a result of a person's constant effort, and that death is nothing but an isthmus called the *barzakh*.¹⁵

Iqbal does not think of God, the Absolute Self, as outside the universe and transcendent, as in kalam, but as immanent with the universe, as in pantheistic philosophy. This means that Iqbal has a philosophy of process, but his understanding of God is not bipolar as in Whitehead. Iqbal's God is the one who does not dissolve finite selves in himself and is close to them in every way. Here, pointing out the verse "His eye turned not aside, nor did it wander" (53/Najm, 17) addressing the Prophet, Iqbal referred to how to be a competent human model and combined the philosophy of the process with the expressions of Islam.¹⁶

In Iqbal's thought, the universe is the behavior and effects of the Infinite Self that surrounds the finite selves. The universe is not a pure mass of matter in the void, but an upper self that is in the organic relationship with the Infinite Self and is the character of the Infinite Self.¹⁷ Iqbal argues that the idea of the predestination of the universe defended by classical theology contrasts with the Qur'an and that this will not go further than a prediction, arguing that every second in the life of God is full of novelty, there are no previously known situations.¹⁸

According to Iqbal, theologians said that everything was written in eternity and that God knew everything before it happened.¹⁹

¹⁴ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 112.

¹⁵ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 113.

¹⁶ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 111.

¹⁷ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 49.

¹⁸ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 39-40.

¹⁹ For the opinions of theologians on this issue, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The*

However, there have been those who have shown evidence that God knows the *unseen* (*ghayb*) based on the Qur'an. This will not go beyond the discussions of what the nature of the unseen is. Iqbal thinks that his own statement is not far from belonging to the literature of the Qur'an and states that the absence of such a renewal is to say that there will be a stagnation of history, and thus creation has lost its meaning.²⁰ Saying that the Qur'an also states that creation is continuous, Iqbal tries to place his own thought somewhere within the framework of the Qur'an.

Iqbal says that the finite mind has no creation, and it sees this thought as an action that happened in the past because it feels itself to be the *other*. The universe then appears to it only as an object. Meaningless discussions about creation stem from the narrow-mindedness of the finite mind. Iqbal, who argues that the universe is only an accident in God's life and that no creation begins and ends in terms of God, says that the universe is not independent of God. Otherwise, the thought that leads to the mention of God and the universe as two separate entities in the void will have emerged.²¹

Iqbal also discusses the possibility of bringing together the concepts of "infinite" and "self" and making them an attribute to God, and he emphasizes that the Infinite is not the same as spatial infinity, because spatial and temporal infinities are not absolute and there is no time and space other than creativity that will separate the Infinite Self from other selves. The eternity of God can be considered in a sense as emanation. The Absolute Self is thus completely different from them, although it includes other selves. While the finite selves occupy a place in the universe, the Infinite Self occupies them not by its extension but by its intention.²² Be-

Philosophy of the Kalam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 660-3.

²⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 74-5.

²¹ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 61-62.

²² Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 61. Descartes used the concept of indefinity instead of infinity. Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, CSM I, 232.

cause there is no space for God, and He is the Absolute Being independent of space and time.

According to Iqbal, the essence of substance is independent of its existence,²³ existence is a quality given to substance by God. The existence of substance, which was a possible being before it took on this quality, is the energy of God. While it was possible, according to Iqbal, the spiritual multiplicity of substance became concrete with the creation of accidents.²⁴ In other words, the matter has turned into an object and has acquired spatial extension. The existence of possible matter has been the transformation of matter into the body.

Iqbal argues that the degree of reality can change with the degree of self, that the self excludes other selves from its own central self and thinks that reality consists of this.²⁵ Man is a self-conscious being, and his self-experience, which consists of states of consciousness, is an experience that flows in a continuous formation by passing from state to state. Self cannot be a fixed entity, it creates itself in the process with its own experience. The guiding element in self shows that the self consists of a cause with a free personality.²⁶ By allowing a finite self to be formed as a result of his own personal action, the Infinite Self has limited its own freedom with its own will. The finite self thus participates in its life, power and freedom.²⁷

Iqbal said that three things are obvious according to the

²³ Being as a quality of substance is not with its essence, for substance is a possible without existence. In this sense, existence is an accident, as Aristotle said. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1017a10. In another sense, being is defined as substance. "The word 'being', designates some substance." Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 63.

²⁴ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 68.

²⁵ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 69. This thought reminds us of Sartre's concept of the *gaze phenomenon*. According to Sartre, man is a central self that sees other beings as mere objects, starting from his own existence. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 364.

²⁶ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 101-3.

²⁷ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 75 and 103.

Qur'an: First; man is the best being that God has chosen and created, about whom the word "self" can be used as his mental state. Second; with all his faults, man is God's representative on earth. Only man can achieve this by being the one whose self-degree is closest to the Supreme Self of all beings in the universe. Third; man has taken the trust, and no other creature has been willing to be entrusted to him. Man has received his self from the Supreme or Absolute Self, and therefore he is the most worthy being for this.²⁸

Consciousness helps to form the personality of man in his relations with himself, the universe and God. Every consciousness in the personality is the self because selves cannot realize the self-experience by itself, and to realize this, the self needs another self. Iqbal sees a conscious interpretation of experience as the only way to understand the self. He found the approach of James, who interpreted consciousness as *a stream of thought*, interesting, and also accepted that his analogy of consciousness to a constantly flashing light was contrary to consciousness.²⁹

According to Iqbal, the experience of the self is in a continuous formation by passing from state to state. The mental states are related to each other, and they all explain it by acting on each other. Iqbal, who argues that the self is not above the things called experience by interacting with each other, says that the experience consists of the actions of the self and that the self itself can only be understood with consciousness, judgment, and will. Iqbal describes the physical structure as the sub-self and states that it will help the formation of a systematic unity of experience by affecting the self.³⁰

²⁸ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 90.

²⁹ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 94-6. Focusing on the impossibility of using thinking in the sense of consciousness, Kant explains that the thinking self is the subject, therefore it cannot be a predicate. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), A348.

³⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 97-9.

References

- Al-Fārābī. *Risāla fī al-'Aql*. Ed. Maurice Bouyges. Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1983.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. John Cottingham & Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Descartes, René. *Principles of Philosophy*. Trans. John Cottingham & Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Gilson, Étienne. *God and Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951.
- Iqbal, Mohammad. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934.
- Iqbal, Muhammad. *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia: A Contribution to the History of Muslim Philosophy*. London: Luzac & Co., 1908.
- Iqbal, Muhammad. *The Secrets of the Self (Asrār-i Khudi): A Philosophical Poem*. Trans. Reynold A. Nicholson. London: Macmillan & Co., 1920.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. London & New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *The Philosophy of the Kalam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

