

# Iqbāl-Nāmāh

*a quarterly publication about the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938)*

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## **The Sectional Character of the Sciences**

*The following selection is taken from the second lecture, "The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience," in Muhammad Iqbal's The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 33–34. In it, Iqbal asks whether hard sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology can fully explain life and consciousness. In his view, the sciences cannot do so since each one of them deals with a part or section, rather than with the whole, of reality. The above-stated question is raised by Iqbal in the larger context of the relationship between science and religion. Iqbal's general position on the relationship between science and religion is that, as long as the essential difference in the approaches taken by science and religion is kept in mind, there need be no conflict between the two.*

Consciousness may be imagined as a deflection from life. Its function is to provide a luminous point in order to enlighten the forward rush of life. It is a case of tension, a state of self-concentration, by means of which life manages to shut out all memories and associations which have no bearing on a present action. It has no well-defined fringes; it shrinks and expands as the occasion demands. To describe it as an epiphenomenon of the processes of matter is to deny it as an independent activity, and to deny it as an independent activity is to deny the validity of all knowledge which is only a systematized expression of consciousness. Thus consciousness is a variety of the purely spiritual principle of life which is not a substance, but an organizing principle, a specific mode of behaviour essentially different to the behaviour of an externally worked machine. Since, however, we cannot conceive of a purely spiritual energy, except in association with a definite combination of sensible elements through which it reveals itself, we are apt to take this combination as the ultimate ground of spiritual energy. The discoveries of Newton in the sphere of matter and those of Darwin in the sphere of

Natural History reveal a mechanism. All problems, it was believed, were really the problems of physics. Energy and atoms, with the properties self-existing in them, could explain everything including life, thought, will, and feeling. The concept of mechanism—a purely physical concept—claimed to be the all-embracing explanation of Nature. And the battle for and against mechanism is still being fiercely fought in the domain of Biology. The question, then, is whether the passage to Reality through the revelations of sense-perception necessarily leads to a view of Reality essentially opposed to the view that religion takes of its ultimate character. Is Natural Science finally committed to materialism? There is no doubt that the theories of science constitute trustworthy knowledge, because they are verifiable and enable us to predict and control the events of Nature. But we must not forget that what is called science is not a single systematic view of Reality. It is a mass of sectional views of Reality—fragments of a total experience which do not seem to fit together. 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. Nature as the subject of science is a highly artificial affair, and this artificiality is the result of that selective process to which science must subject her in the interests of precision. The moment you put the subject of science in the total of human experience it begins to disclose a different character. Thus religion, which demands the whole of Reality and for this reason must occupy a central place in any synthesis of all the data of human experience, has no reason to be afraid of any sectional views of Reality. 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. The concepts we use in the organization of knowledge are, therefore, sectional in character, and their application is relative to the level of experience to which they are applied. The concept of 'cause', for instance, the essential feature of which is priority to the effect, is relative to the subject-matter of physical science which studies one special kind of activity to the exclusion of other forms of activity observed by others. When we rise to the level of life and mind the concept of cause fails us, and we stand in need of concepts of a different order of thought. The action of living organisms, initiated and planned in view of an end, is totally different to causal action. The subject-matter of our inquiry, therefore, demands the concepts of 'end' and 'purpose', which act from within unlike the concept of cause which is external to the effect and acts from without. No doubt, there are aspects of the activity of a living organism which it shares with other objects of Nature. In the

observation of these aspects the concepts of physics and chemistry would be needed; but the behaviour of the organism is essentially a matter of inheritance and incapable of sufficient explanation in terms of molecular physics.

### Definitions for a Dynamic Life

The following poem is taken from Part II of Muhammad Iqbal's Zabūr-i 'Ajam ("Psalms of Persia"). In its five verses, Iqbal defines five things, one in each verse: life, love, rulership, wisdom, and creed. But the definitions offered are not like the ones found in a dictionary; they are intended to sum up aspects of Iqbal's philosophy of life, detailed in many places in his poetry and prose. All five verses stress the need to live an action-oriented life.

زندگی در صدف خویش گهر ناختن است      در دل مُصله فرو رفتن و مگداختن است  
عشق ازین کسب در بسته بزوان ناختن است      شیشه ماه ز طاق کلک انداختن است  
سلطنت تقدل دین کف انداختن است      بر یکی داد جهان دُبان جان ناختن است  
حکمت و فلسفه راهت مردی ما      تیغ اندیشه بروی دو جهان ناختن است  
نَدیب نَمده لَانِ خُوابِ پِشانی نَسیت  
از جبین خاک جهان دُگری ناختن است

Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl – Fārsī (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 404

#### Translation

To live is to form a pearl in the shell of one's self;  
It is to descend into the heart of the flame and not melt.<sup>1</sup>

To love is to break forth from this dome of shut doors,  
It is to fling the goblet of the moon out of the niche of the sky.<sup>2</sup>

To rule is to give up one's capital of heart and faith;  
It is to carry off the world and lose one's life in a single move.<sup>3</sup>

Delving in wisdom and philosophy requires the ambitious resolve of a man;  
It is to unsheathe the sword of thought in the face of the two worlds.<sup>4</sup>

The creed of those with living hearts is not dreaming incoherent dreams;  
It is to fashion, from this very dust, another world.<sup>5</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>**To live . . . melt.** According to the first hemistich, the identifying mark of human life is creativity; merely to exist and survive, without bringing something new into existence, does not qualify as true life. One's goal in life should be to transform oneself from an ordinary being of "water and clay" — a phrase commonly used by poets, including Iqbal, to denote the basic human constitution (Persian: *āb-o gil*) — to a being that thinks, feels, interacts with the world, leaves a mark on the environment, and charts new courses of action. One's goal should be to create worth out of that which has none, to imbue with value or meaning that which has little of either, and to create a pearl-like personality and character inside the body, which, by itself, is no more than an empty shell. Implied in the advice "to form a pearl in the shell of one's self" is the idea that one can and should accomplish the stated goal by relying on one's own resources: it is possible to be an enclosed or self-contained entity and yet, through one's own efforts, to create something entirely new.

The second hemistich means that to live is to confront the most difficult challenges without flinching, bending, or breaking.

Each of the two hemistichs appears to make a separate statement, but, actually, the statements are connected, the second building on the first: only a person with a strong character can confidently and successfully take on the challenges of life.

The second hemistich alludes to Qur'ān 21:68–69, which relates how Abraham the monotheist, thrown into a fire by his idolatrous persecutors, was rescued from it by God, Abraham coming out of the fire unscathed. And about Abraham it may rightly be said, on the basis of Qur'ānic and other evidence, that he succeeded, through his own efforts, to form a pearl in the shell of his self. In his native town of Ur in Mesopotamia, Abraham lived in a hostile polytheistic environment, his own father being a devout worshipper of idols (Qur'ān 6:74; 19:42; 21:52). Abraham rejected the pressure of his family and society, upholding the truth of monotheism — just like a shell that resides in the sea and, resisting the tremendous pressure of the surrounding waters, creates a pearl in its bosom. Furthermore, the Ka'bah that Abraham built in the "uncultivated valley" of Makkah (Qur'ān 14:37) was not unlike a pearl in the shell of the Arabian desert.

<sup>2</sup>**To love is . . . sky.** By “love,” Iqbal generally means, as he does here, complete and single-minded devotion to an ideal. To love, in this sense, is to have boundless drive, which refuses to recognize limits. The sky—“this dome of shut doors”—seems to be the last and the hardest of the obstacles in love’s way, but love overcomes it, too, and it does so by breaking through the heavens, thus establishing its complete independence of its environment. But, in asserting itself, love does not stop at opening up a way through the sealed heavens; it gives a new arrangement to the phenomena of the universe, taking, for instance, the moon out of its customary orbit and setting it in a new orbit. The phrase “to fling the goblet of the moon out of the niche of the sky” draws the picture of an unerring archer who dislodges an object by shooting at it from a distance—hitting the bull’s eye, so to speak. “The goblet of the moon” is, in the Persian text, *shīshah-i māh*, which may also be translated as “the goblet-shaped moon,” or simply as “the moon.”

In the original text, the word *takhtan* (literally, “to attack, invade”) suggests a forcible act: it draws a picture of a horseman who is trying to run a blockade by charging at the enemy.

<sup>3</sup>**To rule is . . . move.** Rulership is usually associated with “seizing” and “usurping” rather than with “ceding” or “quitting one’s hold.” Iqbal, however, stands the conventional definition of rulership on its head. The essence of rulership, according to him, is not “to take,” but “to give.” Iqbal could be analogizing from the Arabic saying, “The leader of people is their servant.” The phrase “one’s capital of heart and faith” (*naqd-i dil-o dīn*) means “all that is dear to one,” “all one’s possessions,” or, simply, “everything” (cf. “heart, mind, and pocketbook”). Rulership, Iqbal goes on to say, is to make an accomplishment as great as that of winning the whole world in a contest, and, to that end, to expend one’s best efforts, even to lay down one’s life if necessary. The word “move” (Persian: *dāw*) in the second hemistich is the move one makes at play and, therefore, has connotations of risk and adventure: In life, one should go for the gold, as the saying has it, and, to that end, one must be ready and willing to play for the highest stakes.

<sup>4</sup>**Delving in . . . worlds.** A philosopher, literally, is one who loves wisdom. But a true lover of wisdom is not one who takes a purely intellectual approach to life, trying to solve complex issues by constructing systems of thought that are logically perfect but bear little relation to reality since they are not the product of an intimate, visceral engagement with the authentic processes of life. In an Urdu verse, Iqbal says:

It is either dead or caught in the throes of death,  
The philosophy that is not written in heart’s blood.

The enigmas of existence cannot be solved by means of cerebral exercises performed in ivory towers. Achievement of wisdom is not a function of the mind alone. It calls for a very high degree of commitment and devotion no less than for deep thinking and reflection: it requires one to have complete independence of mind and to have the courage to leave the beaten track—in a word, to be willing to be led by the truth wherever the truth leads, even if that involves challenging—or, as Iqbal puts it, drawing one’s sword in confrontation with—“the two worlds” (the phrase means “all of existence”).

<sup>5</sup>**The creed . . . world.** All human beings are alive in an ordinary, biological sense, but only those with living hearts are truly alive. What sets the latter apart from others is their direct and intense interest in matters affecting the real, practical life. They are doers, not dreamers. They do not indulge in impractical speculation about changing the world. Possessing a profound vision and a strong resolve, but being thoroughly realistic at the same time, they make and carry out plans that have a far-reaching impact on the world, changing this world of dust into a new world that has both meaning and beauty.

The first hemistich contains an instance of wordplay: “creed” is a translation of *madhhab*, which means both “religion” or “doctrine” and “conduct” or “practice.” Both meanings are equally applicable in the context.

*Mustansir Mir*

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## **Iqbal and Goethe: A Biographical Comparison**

*In many of his verses (for instance, in the beginning of his poetical work *Asrār-i Khudī*), Iqbal compares himself to Goethe, for whom he had a great deal of admiration. Allowing for the differences in their circumstances, Iqbal and Goethe, undoubtedly, have much in common, as is abundantly clear from, for example, many of the papers included in *Iqbal and Goethe*, edited by M. Ikram Ghaghatai (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2000). Unlike Goethe, however, Iqbal never received any long-term financial support from a patron—support that would have freed him from the obligation of earning a livelihood, allowing him to devote his time and genius to what he was most capable of doing and what was dearest to his heart—namely, engaging in literary and philosophical pursuits—and this limitation is indicated in the following selection from *Zindah-Rūd* (“Living Stream”), a biography of Iqbal by his son Javid Iqbal. One or two observations may be offered about the points made by Javid Iqbal. First, Hyderabad in southern India was one of the richest and best-known Muslim states of India before the country’s partition in 1947, and many expected its ruler, the Nizām, who was known for patronizing men of letters, to honor Iqbal by giving him a handsome stipend; one of the peers of the Nizām actually tried to persuade him to do so, but the Nizām did not agree. As Javid Iqbal hints (some details provided by him have been omitted in the following selection), the otherwise fairly powerful Nizām was, in some crucial respects, under the thumb of India’s British rulers, who had, in the past, effectively discouraged him from supporting distinguished Muslim personalities that might later pose a threat to British rule in the country. Iqbal, known for his criticism of British policies in India, was not exactly the type of person to whom the British would permit the Nizām to offer any significant support. Second, while Javid Iqbal rightly says that some kind of patronage might have afforded Iqbal the opportunity to employ his exceptional abilities more fruitfully, the amount, variety, and profundity of Iqbal’s literary and philosophical output remain highly impressive.*

Iqbal's life bears a resemblance to Goethe's in some respects. For instance, like Iqbal, Goethe passed the law examination and, in order to get ahead in the world, set up legal practice in the city of Frankfurt. But Goethe did not much like practicing law and wished to give it secondary importance. To be able to continue his literary activities, he kept looking for a patron. Eventually, in 1775, Duke Karl August appointed him educational advisor in his state, Weimar. Goethe spent the rest of his life in Weimar, where, freed from economic need, he had plenty of time to pursue his literary goals besides attending to state affairs. It seems that Iqbal, too, did not much relish the toil and trouble associated with the legal profession and longed for the opportunity to accomplish his literary goals by ridding himself, under the Nizām's patronage, of economic need. Accordingly, he would offer his services to Hyderabad whenever the occasion to do so arose. . . . It is true that Iqbal never personally asked anyone for help for himself, though a circle of friends and admirers did make efforts to get him financial support—efforts that, for certain reasons, did not meet with success. . . .

Goethe's patron, Duke Karl August, was a sovereign ruler, and his state, Weimar, was an independent German state. So, when appointed the duke's educational advisor, Goethe, set free from economic need, got the opportunity to accomplish his literary goals. But the Nizām was not a fully independent Muslim ruler; neither was Hyderabad a sovereign Muslim state, in the real sense of the expression. As such, Iqbal's wishes were not realized; if they had been, the Islamic world today would be much richer in terms of Iqbal's legacy.

Thus, Iqbal continued to spend most of his time on activities that would earn him and the members of his family a respectable living. All his life, he craved the freedom to engage in research and writing. He composed poetry either during spells of wakefulness at night or during holidays. Sometimes, ideas welled up to him like a flood, unleashing a storm of verses in shapely language, as though a large number of fish had been caught in a fisherman's net, with the fisherman struggling to decide which fish to keep and which to let go. Usually, before the mood to compose poetry came upon him, he experienced a state of intense distress: he changed countenance and tossed and turned in bed, at times sitting up or letting his head sink between his knees. After he had written down the verses in his notebook, signs of calm gradually appeared on him, and he would fall into a tranquil sleep.

*Javid Iqbal, Zindah-Rūd*

*(Lahore: Sheikh Ghulam Ali and Sons, 1979), 353–360*

*Translated by Mustansir Mir*

## **Knowledge and Fate**

Knowledge partly contributes to the structure of what we call objective reality; but the character of events that drop out of the womb of Fate is wholly determined by the heart of man. It is the weak man who endows Fate with its sting. The strong man exploits his misfortunes. Inasmuch as he enhances the force of his soul by maintaining an attitude of total indifference to them.

*Muhammad Iqbal, Stray Reflections, revised edition,  
ed. Javid Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), 135*

## **The Weak and the Strong**

The weak lose themselves in God; the strong discover Him in themselves.

*Muhammad Iqbal, Stray Reflections, revised edition,  
ed. Javid Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), 140*

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