IQBAL ON SELF AND PRIVACY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF WITTGENSTEIN’S PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Abstract: The conception of self enjoys a pivotal position in the philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal. He rejects the picture of self construed on the analogy of a thing. Self, for him, is an act not a thing. The appropriate method of knowing the self, according to him, is through the interpretation of conscious experience, which reveals that it is a unity in which states of consciousness melt into one another and form an organic whole. With this notion, the problem of freedom, the relation between mind and body, and the issue of immortality are explained in ways that are different from the dominant philosophical tradition. Like other philosophers, however, Iqbal seems to cling to the notion of “privacy” as the essence of self/mind which leads to some fundamental problems in philosophy and has been the focus of attention of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. The present paper will attempt to examine Iqbal’s conception of self as he developed it in The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam and will also examine the issue of privacy in the light of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations.

Key words: Muhammad Iqbal, L. Wittgenstein God, self, ego, privacy, consciousness

Muhammad Iqbal’s philosophical system revolves around the notion of self or ego. For him, God¹ is a self or ego, who is absolutely perfect, and whatever God creates has selfhood. The realization of self is different at different levels. God is an absolutely perfect ego. Man is a relatively perfect self as he is a self-conscious being and is capable of having direct contact with ultimate reality through religious/mystical experience.

Human ego, for Iqbal, is the finite center of all experience.² Mental states or experiences form an organic whole by being internally related to each other, which is called mind.³ The internal relation, which is characteristic of the mental realm, makes it different from the external world. The difference between them is fully captured in the two conceptions of time that seem to be synonymous with Iqbal’s system. Like Bergson, Iqbal distinguishes between serial time and duration. The former belongs to the external world, while the latter to the world of consciousness.⁴ This makes it impossible to study the nature of

self with the help of scientific methodology, i.e., modern psychology, as scientific methodology operates on the external world of serial time where one deals with kinds of things and not with their uniqueness. Uniqueness also belongs to the essence of self. According to Iqbal, “Mental unity is absolutely unique.”

Not only science but philosophy has also failed to understand the nature of self because philosophical attempts are conceptual investigations and the notion of self is so subtle and unique that it cannot be intellectualized. Moreover, when intellectualized, the self, like other concepts, becomes something static and loses both its uniqueness and individuality. What one gets after this effort is the notion of soul-substance which can also be found in al-Ghazali and other classical philosophers. According to Iqbal, al-Ghazali’s “ego is a simple, indivisible, and immutable soul-substance, entirely different from the group of our mental states and unaffected by the passage of time. Our conscious experience is a unity, because our mental states are related as so many qualities to this simple substance which persists unchanged during the flux of its qualities.”

Iqbal disagrees with the view of soul substance. The following may be noted in this connection:

i) Like Kant, Iqbal maintains that it is not possible to argue for the ontological status of soul substances on the basis of any formal condition of thought. He says that “[t]he ‘I think’ which accompanies every thought is, according to Kant, a purely formal condition of thought, and the transition from a purely formal condition of thought to ontological substance is logically illegitimate.”

ii) The soul substance does not reveal itself in experience, and is of no psychological interest.

iii) The phenomenon of alternating personality cannot be explained with the help of soul substance.

Iqbal is also dissatisfied with the views of interactionism or parallelism of mind and body, which are characteristic of Cartesian dualism and Spinoza’s pantheism. He holds that the true nature of self cannot be revealed through any of these positions. Such a task can only be accomplished through the interpretation of conscious experience. Experience, therefore, is the correct way of knowing the nature of self. Iqbal finds this approach in William James. Iqbal of contents:

William James conceives consciousness as “a stream of thought” – a conscious flow of changes with a felt continuity. He finds a kind of gregarious principle working in our experiences which have, as it were, ‘hooks’ on them, and thereby catch up one another in the flow of mental life. The ego consists of the feelings of personal life, and is, as such, part of the system of thought. Every pulse of thought, present or perishing, is an indivisible unity which knows and recollects. The appropriation of the passing pulse by the present pulse of thought, and that of the present by its successor, is the ego.