

## Abstract

### Concept of Man and Free Will in Iqbal's worldview

Man's purpose of 'creation' is to be the vicegerent of God on Earth. Although finite, Man shares in a powerful quality with God, that of free will. This quality allows man to engage in an infinite possibility of activities, even those contrary to the will of God. It is free will that gives Man, his *khudi*: his independent robust identity. *Khudi* is a characteristic so powerful that it does not efface its own identity even in the presence of the divine reality (*fana*). God's final messenger best manifests this quality, during his spiritual journey to the Divine (*Miraj*). It is the development of the *Khudi* that is the ultimate goal of every Man, ultimate success depends upon the maturation of a fully developed Ego. A fully developed Ego has the ability to determine its own destiny.

Iqbal refutes the heavily deterministic theories of neoplatonic Islamic thinkers, arguing that their philosophy minimizes the possibilities of the Self, and limit the awesome quality of free will. Even Ghazzali failed to go far enough to counter neoplatonic thought, he argues. He also criticizes traditional notions of the Ego in Islam, which appear to degrade the Self. This has led to the worst type of fatalism that has gripped Muslim society. Sufism alone, according to Iqbal, truly appreciates the entire potential of the Self. Iqbal's main contribution is to systematically layout a theory of personal identity within the context of Islamic philosophy taking into account modern western thought.

Traditional notions of man and free will in Islamic philosophy, popular Islamic thought and Western philosophy will be examined in this paper. Iqbal's argument for his theory of the self will be presented. The extrinsic Islamic (Ibn Arabi) and Western influences (Nietzsche) upon Iqbal's thought within the larger context of Islamic philosophy will be examined. The potential of future directions of thought will also be explored.

# Iqbal and the Philosophy of the Self And Free Will

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## Introduction

Many scholars, historians and theologians have put forth theories attempting to explain the downfall of Islamic civilization. For Iqbal it revolves strictly around the mistaken idea of Qismat, which had and still grips much of the Muslim world.

Islamic intellectuals and even orthodox Islamic theologians failed to break away from neoplatonic ideas concerning human nature and the self. Sufism alone tried to fully appreciate the entire potential of the human ego. Even here it was widely misunderstood by the people.

Iqbal reinterprets the idea of the ego in Islam. He transforms its traditionally negative connotations into positive ones. His ideas give hope to the Muslim individual. In a deeper sense in the context of Sufism, his explanation of the concept of Fana has tremendous implications regarding the potential of the human ego.

In this paper traditional notions of the ego and free will within Islam will be explored. This will be followed by Iqbal's criticisms of these ideas and then a framework of Iqbal's own theory on the ego and free will, shall be laid out.

The primary texts used in this study are Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, and his Persian work, *Secrets of the Self*.

### Traditional Notions of Ego and Free Will

The ego has traditionally been regarded as a negative force in the Muslim tradition. The ego is associated with evil intentions, arrogance, and lack of spirituality. One Muslim scholar describes the concept as follows:

Along with our souls, Allah (SWT) has placed within us something called the 'Nafs' or the 'Self', which encourages our evil passions, our relish for food and other sensual gratification. The Nafs also keeps us occupied with the worldly affairs thus preventing us from following the orders of Allah (SWT).”<sup>1</sup>

The Quran lays out in fairly clear terms the concept of the Nafs (or Ego) within Islam. It describes three forms or types of the ego. These are:

1. Nafs al Ammara-bis-Su - "Enjoining-unto-Evil" [Quran 12:53]
2. Nafs al Lawwama - "the Guilty Ego" [Quran 75:2]
3. Nafs al Mutmainna - "the Ego at-Peace" [Quran 89:27]

### Suppression of the Ego

In the history of Islamic thought, the concept of the Evil-self has hijacked the entire discussion on this topic. The conception of a positive self-assured and robust ego has been suppressed for a myriad of reasons. Instead the concept of the evil self has been propagated for the benefit of the political and religious establishment.

The word ego has become synonymous with the “nafs al ammarah.” Following the desires of the ego is considered selfish and ungodly. Quranic verses are used to suggest that one should obey God instead of following one’s own ego. It states,

Have you seen the one whose god is his own ego? Will you be his advocate? Do you think that most of them hear, or understand? They are just like animals; no, they are far worse.” (Quran 25:43-44)

The ego is considered something to be destroyed before one can progress on the spiritual path. The taking of the calf as an idol by the people of Moses is considered an act full of ego-ness. It is they following their own desires instead of the commands of God. Regarding this Allah states:

Recall that Moses said to his people, "O my people, you have wronged your souls by worshiping the calf. You must repent to your Creator. You shall kill your egos.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://chisty.freehosting.net/nafs.html>

This is better for you in the sight of your Creator." He did redeem you. He is the Redeemer, Most Merciful. (Quran 2:54)

Have you noted the one whose god is his ego? Consequently, GOD sends him astray, despite his knowledge, seals his hearing and his mind, and places a veil on his eyes. Who then can guide him, after such a decision by GOD? Would you not take heed? (Quran 45:23)

The fall of Iblis is thought to be related to his ego as well. Satan's ego suggested to him that he is too glorified of a character to submit himself in prostration to a mere human. The implication then is that it is the ego that caused human's exile from paradise. It is then the subjugation and destruction of the ego that is considered the key to one's salvation. It is this subduing of the ego that leads to higher moral character.

Although Sufism is the only discipline to take the Ego seriously, certain statements by Sufi's have been misinterpreted by the masses. One such statement is as follows:

He who is satisfied with the affliction that God sends is satisfied because in the affliction he sees the Author thereof and can endure its pain by contemplating Him who sent it; nay, he does not account it painful, such is his joy in contemplating his Beloved.<sup>2</sup>

Iqbal thinks popular Muslim culture has taken these comments out of context. It is these sort of interpretations that have led to a docile culture within the Muslim world. They have chosen to focus on the negative aspects of the ego. Iqbal would phrase the issue differently. He would describe the categories of ego's described above as "weak" ego's. The ego's discussed above are immature and thus criticized by God. The Ego has enormous potential. A fully developed ego, is above and beyond, the considerations of the material world discussed above. As discussed later, it is a powerful independent force.

#### Fall of the Ego to Fatalism

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<sup>2</sup> Hijweri, Ali *Kash-al-Majub*

Thus given this intrinsic evilness in the self, it undermines the confidence and creative ability of the ego. The Muslim individual no longer senses the ability in itself to change its own destiny. The consequence of this negative attitude towards the human self has led to an attitude of passivity amongst the Muslims. According to Iqbal a very deep form of fatalism taken hold amongst the Muslims.

Even the most classical and orthodox thinkers amongst the Muslims have fallen prey to this fatalistic attitude towards life. Predeterminism has become the prevalent belief amongst the People. The term, “Qismat” embodies all these values. Verses from the Holy Quran are used as reinforcement for this way of thinking. Allah states,

If Allah so willed He could make you all one people: but He leaves straying whom He pleases and He guides whom He pleases: but ye shall certainly be called to account for all your actions. (Quran 16:93)

The implication being that it is not man but God that determines the path for the individual. If God decides not to guide someone their fate is sealed, no matter what their own will be. Verses like the following are used as justification. Allah states,

God has sealed their hearts and their hearing, and over their eyes is a veil; and grave suffering awaits them.<sup>25</sup>

These factors have led to prevalent “Quietistic way of life” (AS 306) in Muslim countries. Values of ego-weakening and aesthetic activity have been dominant within the Muslim world.

Iqbal calls this idea of Qismat, “the most degrading type of Fatalism.” He views the above sentiments to run completely against the true spirit of Islam. The Quran elsewhere states:

Verily God will not change the condition of men, till they change what is in themselves. (Sura 13:12)

Man is capable of creating his own destiny. All is not necessarily predetermined according to Iqbal. Unfortunately the concept of Qismat has taken root since early Islamic civilization and has both Philosophical and Political roots.

Philosophy in its quest to prove the existence of God via logic and reasoning could at best come up with a theory of causation. The cosmological perceives God as the “last link in the chain of causation, and, consequently, the real author of all that happens in the universe.” Thus if God is the ultimate cause of everything, then it is God who is responsible for everything in the world. Furthermore, most of the neoplatonic arguments for God’s existence are arguments of necessity. That is, they tend to deny not only Man’s free will but even that of God! In this view then there is no room for the concept or the personal ego to fit. Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought had been the dominant form of intellectual discourse within the Islamic world. Iqbal strongly criticizes Plato in his *Asrar-i-Khudi* (Secrets of the Self). Not only does his system of thinking lead to predeterminism but he also deemphasized the importance of the material world. He favored intellectual pursuit to action.

Plato, the prime ascetic and sage.  
Was one of that ancient flock of sheep.  
The peoples were poisoned by his intoxication:  
He slumbered and took no delight in deeds.

Even though Ghazzali was successful in discrediting many of the Greek theories, even he failed to break away from certain neoplatonic ideas. Ghazzali successfully refuted neoplatonic ideas concerning causality. His solution, however, is just as problematic.

Iqbal writes, “Ghazzali failed to see that thought, in the very act of knowledge, passes beyond its own finitude. Thought ... is incapable of limitation and cannot remain imprisoned in the narrow circuit of its own individuality”

Ghazzali unable to justify religion in a scientific or analytic thought jumped to mystic experience and intuition as the way in which the infinite reality is revealed to the finite via intuition. (Iqbal p.5) Iqbal thinks Ghazzali gave up on the ego’s ability to perceive God too easily. The thinking self is really the key to the kind of mystical experience sought after by the Sufi.

The problem it seems for Iqbal is that “intuition” bypasses the ego. It is no great feat for the ego or intellect or thought or self to achieve knowledge of God. Rather it is simply intuition, i.e. God passively revealing himself to man in a convincing and

impressive manner giving him knowledge of Gods existence. For Iqbal, this is tantamount to the idea of Qismat.

Politically motivated forces also reinforced this idea. If the dominant ruling dynasty could convince the public to accept life as God has given to them, this would certainly be to their advantage. It would suppress and weaken any opposition to their rule. The Quranic idea of “will of God” is misinterpreted to support the status quo. For Iqbal this is similar to the constitutional theory of “the accomplished fact.” Thus downplaying the significance of any individual ego.

The lack of scientific, political, social, philosophical, and economic progress amongst the Muslim world can then be traced to this notion of the Qismat. The ideals of Humanism, which rescued Europe from a similar stale mentality never, took root in Islam. It was this belief in the power human individual that led to the European renaissance, scientific and industrial revolutions.

Iqbal boldly states that this is due to Muslim’s misunderstanding of a very fundamental concept in Islam. The basic concept of Man has been misinterpreted, and Man’s potential has thus been limited. Iqbal then lays out, what for him, is the real Islamic concept of the Ego. This is better known as his philosophy of *Khudi*, or the Self.

### **Iqbal’s concept of Khudi, Self**

#### **Its Beginning and Manifestation**

The Self or the Ego is not like other creations. It is not created like other beings; rather the Quran has a unique concept regarding the genesis of the Self. The Quran makes a distinction between the “creation” of the ego and creation of the material world. As it states,

“‘And they ask thee of the soul. Say: the soul proceedeth from my Lord’s *Amr* [Command]: but of knowledge, only a little to you is given’ (17:85).

The distinction is key. The Quran uses the word *Amr* for the beginning of the soul, which literally means “direction”, and not the word “*khalq*” which it uses for the

rest of the material word and literally means “creation.” These are two separate and distinct concepts in the Quran and best articulated in Quranic Arabic. The word used for the creation of the soul is not “khalq” it is “Amr”. God gave “direction” to the soul. Elsewhere the Quran states, “To Him belong creation and direction” (7:54). The suggestion here is that the ego is not to be taken as a created thing, like the Sun, Moon and Earth. Rather, the soul must be taken as an individual, an act, and a personality. This gives rise to the concept of “Rabbi” which means “My Lord,” with an emphasis upon the “My”.

Now of fine clay We have created man: Then We placed him, a moist germ, in a safe abode; then made We the moist germ a clot of blood: then made the clotted blood into a piece of flesh; then made the piece of flesh into bones: and We clothed the bones with flesh; *then brought forth man of yet another make.* (23:12-14).

The phrase, “man of yet another make” provides for Iqbal evidence of this profounder ego that the human is capable of. This phrase is referring to the *Amr* of the self. The beginning of the self is the climax of human creation. It is what makes the creation of man most extraordinary. It is the ego that is the essence of man. It is not the physical body; it is rather the intellect, the self that represents God’s magnificent *Amr*.

**15:28 Behold! thy Lord said to the angels: "I am about to create man, from sounding clay from mud moulded into shape;  
15:29 "When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him."**

### Characteristics of Man

Iqbal explores the concept of man in the Quran. The concept is based upon three ideas, culminating in his final third point:

1. Man is the chosen of God. This is evident in the following Quranic verse:  
‘Afterwards his Lord chose him [Adam] for himself and turned towards, him, and guided him, (20:122).

2. Man is meant to be the representative of God on earth, as witnessed in the following verse:

‘When thy Lord said to the angels, "Verily I am about to place one in my stead on Earth", they said, ‘Wilt Thou place there one who will do ill therein and shed blood, when we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness?’ God said, "Verily I know what you know not", (2:30).

‘And it is He Who hath made you His representatives on the Earth, and hath raised some of you above others by various grades, that He may prove you by His gifts’ (6:165).

3. Man is the trustee of a *free personality*, which he accepted at his peril. This for Iqbal is the most important point:

‘Verily We proposed to the Heavens, and to the Earth, and to the mountains to receive the "trust", but they refused the burden and they feared to receive it. Man undertook to bear it, but hath proved unjust, senseless!’ (33:72).

### Freedom of Will

The Quran recognizes the freedom of the ego to act on its own behalf. The ego is responsible and thus completely free to act on its own as evidenced by the following verses:

And say: The truth is from your Lord: Let him, then, who will, believe: and let him who will, be an unbeliever’ (18:29).

If ye do well to your own behalf will ye do well: and if ye do evil against yourselves will ye do it (17:7).

Man responsible for his own actions, which he chooses at his own free will. Free will is a unique quality of the ego, which no other creation has. The ego thus has characteristics, which only one other being has, namely God. Iqbal writes, “The ego shares in the life and freedom of the Ultimate Ego who, by permitting the emergence of a finite ego, capable of private initiative, has limited this freedom of His own free will.”

The debate between predestination and free will has been an ancient debate within in Islam. Iqbal comes down strongly in favor of free will. However, his concept is qualified. Only fully developed ego’s are truly capable of complete free will. Iqbal in his

dialogue with Rumi, asks him to solve the problem of predestination and free will. Rumi responds,

The wing of the falcon brings to the king,  
The wing of the crow brings him to the cemetery

Annemarie Schimmel quotes the original passage from his Masnavi (VI 1444)

Destiny is the prison and chain of the ignorant.  
Understand that destiny like the water of the Nile:  
Water before the faithful, blood before the unbeliever.

Finitude is not a misfortune

A common perception and limiting factor for the ego tends to be the idea that since the ego is finite it can never comprehend the infinite. Iqbal clarifies the concept of the ego in three steps derived from the Quran:

1. **The ego has a beginning in time.** It did not pre-exist its emergence in the spatio-temporal order. 23:12-14
2. **There is no possibility of return to this earth**  
‘When death overtaketh one of them, he saith, "Lord! send me back again, that I may do the good that I have left undone!" By no means These are the very words which he shall speak. But behind them is a barrier (*Barzakh*), until the day when they shall be raised again’ (23:99-100).
3. **That finitude is not a misfortune:**  
Verily there is none in the heavens and in the earth but shall approach the God of Mercy as a servant. He hath taken note of them and numbered them with exact numbering: and each of them shall come to Him on the Day of Resurrection as a single individual’ (19:93-95).

This is a very important point and must be properly understood with a view to secure a clear insight into the Islamic theory of salvation. It is with the irreplaceable singleness of his individuality that the finite ego will approach the infinite ego to see for himself the consequences of his past action and to judge the possibilities of his future.

On the last day man is presented in front of God as an individual. Him being personally responsible for himself. And every man's fate have We fastened about his neck: and on the Day of Resurrection will We bring forthwith to him a book which shall be proffered to him wide open: "Read thy book: there needeth none but thyself to make out an account against thee this day" (17:13-14). This independence of the ego, its finite, and its self-assertion is a key concept in Islam.

#### Mystical experience of the Finite with the Infinite

The only discipline within Islam to consider a positive attitude towards the Ego is Sufism. The Sufi finds rebirth in the self, and in some sense experiences the Nafs al-Mutmainna. Even the Sufi notions, however, have often been distorted by the popular culture.

Contrary to popular belief which involves oneself losing oneself within the infinite divine. Iqbal writes,

In the higher Sufism of Islam Unitive experience with the divine is not the finite ego effacing its own identity by some sort of absorption into the infinite Ego; it is rather the Infinite passing into the loving embrace of the finite.

The reality then is that the individual ego has developed to such a degree, that now God himself is manifest within the individual. The individual does not lose his or her identity. The individual does not become God. Rather the status of Nafs al-Mutmainna has been reached and now, Man's will is God's will. Not because they are coincidentally the same, but rather that God's will is Man's will because it is Man's will.

This is different than the usual explanation, which seems to subtly imply that the ego is lost in God. God is the ultimate reality and the ego is just a passing creation. Iqbal considers this a misunderstanding of the concept of *Fana*. Iqbal emphasizes that the individual identity of the ego is never lost.

Describing the mystical experience of Hallaj, Iqbal writes,

The true interpretation of his experience, therefore, is not the drop slipping into the sea, but the realization and bold affirmation in an undying phrase of the reality and permanence of the human ego in a profounder personality.

Iqbal writes in his poetical method,

When he becomes annihilated in the satisfaction of God  
The faithful man becomes the destiny of God (Pas 14)

The human ego develops to such a level, that God himself asks man what destiny he would like to choose for himself.

God asks man before destiny: Art thou satisfied? (BJ 81 cf 254)  
(Gabriel's Wing. 311-313)

Human destiny is a creative process, which can be altered by God if encountered by a fully developed Ego.

This is what explains the sayings of many famous mystics: 'I am the creative truth' (Hallaj), 'I am Time' (Muhammad), 'I am the speaking Qur'an' ('Ali), 'Glory to me' (BaYasid). It is God being manifest in man, with man losing his own identity. Man retains his own independence and humanity. It is through this process that man can perceive God. As Rumi writes:

'Divine knowledge is lost in the knowledge of the saint! And how is it possible for people to believe in such a thing?' (Asrar Khudi pp. xviii-xix.)

For Iqbal, as with other major Muslim awyilia and theologians the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) represents the peak of humanity. He is the ultimate ideal of the perfect Ego. This is what explains the following verse in the holy Quran describing the Prophet (pbuh) action during a battle:

It is not ye who slew them; it was Allah: when thou threwest (a handful of dust), it was not thy act, but Allah's. (Quran 8:17)

His ego development had reached such a level that God himself is manifest in the Prophet actions. However, the ego remains a unique powerful figure.

Even in the ultimate mystical experience possible by any person, the fully developed and perfected Ego maintains its independence. As in the case of the Miraaj of the holy Prophet (pbuh), the Quran states,

‘His eye turned not aside, nor did it wander’ (53:17).

The Prophet (pbuh) finitude as a man did not hinder his remarkable mystical experience. He did not loose himself in God, rather he maintained his ego and in doing so was able to rise to this higher level. Iqbal calls this, “the ideal of perfect manhood in Islam.”

This is in stark comparison to a weaker ego symbolized by Moses’ premature request to see God, which ended in his own unconsciousness.

Moses fainted away by a mere surface illumination of Reality.  
Thou seest the very substance of Reality with a smile!  
(Sufi poet Jamali of Delhi who died in 942/1535)

Objections to finitude

Pantheistic Sufism may object to this doctrine. Asking such questions as, how can the ego be separated from its original source? And is the finite ego capable of retaining its finitude besides the Infinite Ego?

Iqbal explains that this arises from a misunderstanding regarding what is being said. Iqbal is referring to independence with regards to the intensity of the human ego and not extensity. As far as extensity everything emanates from God, just as Man is extensively related to the spatiotemporal world. However, intensively Man regards himself as independent and distinct yet not isolated from the physical world. "I am distinct from and yet intimately related to that on which I depend for my life and sustenance." Man may have evolved from animals, and may consider himself in continuation with them on a physical level. However, on personal, spiritual and "ego"-level, man conceives of himself as a totally independent person. This may relate to the debate regarding Wahdat al-Wujud and Wahdat al-Shuhud within Islamic thought.

### Stages of the Ego

So how then does one go about this development of the ego to this remarkable level? How then can man achieve this level of a fully developed ego? In his *Asrar-Khudi*, Iqbal delineates three stages in the development of the proper ego. These are namely:

1. Obedience: Following the commandments of the shariah is paramount. He describes the toil of the camel in this regard.

Do not complain of the hardness of the Law.  
Do not transgress the statutes of Muhammad!

2. Self Control: Next one must discipline oneself to take control of ones ego, and then begin the journey on the path towards its infinite possibilities

Thou art impregnable, if thy Islam be strong.  
Draw might from the litany "O Almighty One!"

That thou mayst ride the camel of thy body.<sup>72</sup>

3. Divine Vicengerence: Finally the ego arrives at this level. The ego or self is now the representative of God on earth. A powerful title embodying the enormous potential of the ego.

God's vicegerent is as the soul of the universe,  
His being is the shadow of the Greatest Name.  
He knows the mysteries of part and whole,  
He executes the command of Allah in the world.

Through these stages the ego is able to reach the level of enormous influence and power. The ego, traditionally thought of as being a worthless creatures, now manifests itself in all its glory. Writing elsewhere in his Urdu writings, Iqbal writes,

Your prayer cannot change the Order of the Universe,  
But it is possible that praying will alter your being;  
If there is a revolution in your inner Self  
It will not be strange, then, if the whole world changes too"  
(Sarab-e-Kalim)

If you can change yourself, if you can realize the potential of your ego, it is not unreasonable to expect that you may also change the world.

It has been suggested that these stages parallel those stated by Nietzsche. For Nietzsche the stages were: first, the spirit is camel, then the lion, and then the child. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was another existentialist philosopher. He also describes the three stages of life as, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Iqbal's stages may on the surface demonstrate superficial similarities to these existentialist philosophers, however it is likely Iqbal draws deeper inspiration from Islamic sources such as higher Sufism and Ibn Arabi. The idea of Nietzsche's Superman points to some parallels between the theories of the two philosophers also. However Annemarie Schimmel in her *Mystical dimensions of Islam* writes

Iqbal's ideas of the Perfect Man as he who has developed his individual possibilities to the fullest bloom are derived from (Ibn Arabi's) theories rather than from Nietzschean superman.

(Mystical dimensions 273)

## Conclusion

Given these principles, the understanding of the ego becomes crisper. Iqbal has established that the Ego shares in divine practice of free will, that the ego's finitude is not a limiting factor and the ego's ultimate mystical experience, like that of the Prophet (pbuh) is one of ego-building, not ego-killing.

True Iman or Faith then is not just the intellectual belief in a set of concepts rather it is the manifestation of those propositions in a living assurance of experience. Life exists for ego-activity, which man is free to engage in. He is hence responsible for his activity and he is given tremendous opportunity to grow his ego into infinite possibilities. Iqbal writes,

There are no pleasure-giving and pain-giving acts; there are only ego-sustaining and ego-dissolving acts. It is the deed that prepares the ego for dissolution, or disciplines him for a future career. The principle of the ego-sustaining deed is respect for the ego in myself as well as in others. Personal immortality, then, is not ours as of right; it is to be achieved by personal effort. Man is only a candidate for it.

Physical death is not a real death; the ego continues to exist in the state of Barzakh. Even if the ego enters hell, for Iqbal, as the ego continues to struggle and strengthen it may earn for itself a position in heaven.

Iqbal's view, in many ways, is a radical notion within Islamic thought. If only because he has reignited a debate within Islamic mysticism and philosophy that had long been 'resolved.' His use of modern science and philosophy with relation to Islamic

thought has provided new light to the Islamic concept of the ego. Many issues within Islamic philosophy of mind remain to be explored. Iqbal's powerful reassertion of the "Ego" has brought the issue to the forefront.