
Making Sense of Muhammad Iqbal's Metaphysics of Egohood

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Abstract

Muhammad Iqbal's theory of egohood, also known as *Khudi*, selfhood, I-amness, or individuality, builds the foundation of his entire philosophical oeuvre. Despite a massive hoard of literature produced on the exposition of Iqbal's theory of egohood, it is still elusive to grasp. Iqbal's theory of egohood is a metaphysical theory that explains not only the ontology of the universe but also of human beings. An ego is an ontological substance: a unit of metaphysical or mental reality. This substance refers to the unique individuality of the existing beings. Iqbal's metaphysics of egohood contradicts the pantheistic metaphysics developed by Ibn al-Arabi's writings in the Islamic tradition. To make sense of Iqbal's theory of egohood, I investigate three questions: first, why did Iqbal posit his theory of egohood? I argue that Iqbal developed his theory of egohood to reject the pantheistic metaphysics, which undermines the individualities of God and humans as autonomous agencies. According to Iqbal's metaphysics, God and human persons refer to autonomous individualities. Second, what is Iqbal's theory of egohood? Iqbal's theory of egohood explains the ontology of the psychical (mental or immaterial) world, the organic (living physical) world, and the inorganic (non-living physical) world. Iqbal uses the expression Supreme Ego for God, while (finite) egos for humans and other entities of the universe. Third, what does Iqbal want to do with his theory of egohood? Iqbal wants to explain his social, moral, political, and religious philosophies with his theory of egohood. So, the article intends to make sense of Iqbal's metaphysical theory of egohood.

Keywords: egohood (*Khudi*, selfhood, I-amness, individuality), pantheism, panentheism, metaphysics, humanism, Muslim philosophy.

1. Introduction

Iqbal's scholars develop a common mind among themselves that Iqbal's theory of egohood is the heart of his entire philosophical system. Yet, Iqbal's scholars produced a large amount of work to explain his theory of egohood, which would make a boat sink into the water if it were loaded on the boat. Despite creating a massive hoard of literature on the exposition of Iqbal's theory, it still remains elusive. There is neither consistency among different explanations of the theory nor any relation to Iqbal's actual theory. This article explains an overarching argument of Iqbal's theory of egohood to examine three crucial questions: first, why did Iqbal develop his theory of egohood? Second, what is Iqbal's theory of egohood? Third, what did Iqbal want to achieve from his theory of egohood? The crux of the argument of Iqbal's theory of egohood holds that it is a metaphysical theory that explains the ontology of humans, the universe, and God. In the human realm, Iqbal's theory of egohood refers to one's unique individuality to recognise one's unique human potential to be a creative agent in the world. Iqbal's theory of egohood has social, religious, moral, economic, legal, political, and scientific implications. Significantly, Iqbal's theory of egohood is an ontological substance like that of many modern European philosophers, notably Descartes' *cogito*, Leibniz's monad, Schopenhauer's will, Nietzsche's power, and Bergson's *elan vital*. So, in Iqbal's thought, ego is an ontological substance of the conscious experience of the individual and holistic lives.

Like Descartes in the European tradition, Muhammad Iqbal begins his philosophy with a metaphysical inquiry of I-amness, which he calls *Khudi*, ego, self, or individuality. The central question is, what is this thing called "I"? Descartes draws a metaphysical inference of the existence of his self from his experience of conscious thinking: *cogito ergo sum*. Similarly, Iqbal develops a metaphysical theory of egohood, which explains the ontology of "I" in the world of "us". This "I" refers to the individuality of the human person, replete with numerous potentials, such as creativity and knowledge. Descartes' ontology comprises two substances in the universe: mind and body. Mind and body refer to incorporeal and material substances, respectively. Iqbal's ontology of egohood is immaterial, which is spiritual in nature. Iqbal's ontology of the universe consists of egos, which may be categorised as God, the universe, and the human. To develop a metaphysical explanation of reality, Iqbal's primary goal is to explain the worth of human persons, their status in the universe, and their relation to the universe, and God.

Notably, Iqbal develops an ego-centric metaphysics of the universe to reject the metaphysics of pantheism¹, which affects the individualities of God and human persons. According to Iqbal, God and human beings are autonomous individuals.² 'Pantheism' explains that the universe is the manifestation of God rather than His creation.³ Pantheism implies that God and humans are not independent of each other; they do not have particular individualities. According to the pantheistic metaphysics, God and human lose their individualities. Pantheism disproves the autonomous individualistic personalities of God and human beings. Iqbal replaces pantheism with panentheism and humanism to protect the unique individualities of God and human persons. Panentheism, which supports the idea of God as the Creator of the universe, is consistent with Iqbal's metaphysics of egohood. Moreover, humanism, which defends the human person as an autonomous individual, is also compatible with Iqbal's metaphysics of egohood. So, egohood, in Iqbal's philosophical corpus, is a tool to explain the ontology of God, the universe, and human beings.

2. The Metaphysics of Pantheism

Iqbal carefully investigated the causes of the rise and decline of the Muslim civilisation. Iqbal identified three causes of the decline of the Muslim civilisation: mysticism, *Mullaism* (clergy), and dynastic kingship.⁴ Yet, *Mullaism* and dynastic kingship, which, of course, have religious and political imports, are not relevant here. I embark only on the mysticism which adversely affects Muslim culture and civilisation. Iqbal argues that a kind of mysticism negatively influenced Muslim civilisation, affecting the cosmological understanding of reality and the human world. This type of mysticism is pantheism, also known as *wahdat al-wujud* in Persian and Urdu. Certainly, mysticism was once a powerful means of spiritual education; it has now become a way to take advantage of people's ignorance and gullibility.⁵ The expression "pantheism" has a Greek etymology, which means 'all' is 'God'. Conversely, 'God is all'. As Iqbal pointed out the adverse effects of pantheism, Ishrat Hassan Enver, in his work, *The Metaphysics of Iqbal*, endorses that pantheists reject the reality of the self and view the world of phenomena as non-existent and unreal. This perspective has negative implications for human moral and social responsibilities. Pantheism, in a general sense, makes people indifferent to moral and social responsibilities. That is why Iqbal declares pantheistic mysticism as the cause of the decline of the Muslim world. In his book, *The Metaphysics of Iqbal*, Ishrat Hassan Enver states that Iqbal was aware of the negative consequences of pantheism.⁶

T. L. S. Sprigge expounds on the philosophical concept of pantheism. In his exposition, Sprigge equates God with the universe.⁷ 'Pantheism' means 'the unity of all beings'. To explain his account of pantheism, Sprigge draws on the O.E.D, which defines pantheism: "the religious belief or philosophical theory that God and the universe are identical (implying a denial of the personality and transcendence of God); the doctrine that God is everything and everything is God." According to this definition, which asserts the equivalence of God and the universe, Sprigge understands that pantheists differ on whether God is a person.⁸ One significant implication in the definition is denying God's personality as a transcendental Being. The denial of God's personality as a transcendental Being adversely affects God's power of creation.

The argument is based on the premise that if God and the universe are the same, there is a unity of being. Yet, this unity adversely affects the individualities of God and humans. To be a God means to meet certain essential conditions, including being a creator, all-knowing, real, ever-present, all-powerful, moral, perfect, an object of worship, and a controlling force.⁹ Without these attributes, can a being be called a God? Certainly not. To be a God means to bear distinctive Divine capabilities. Hence, pantheists hold that "the totality of all" means no distinction between a creator God and the created world.¹⁰ Pantheists entail the view that there is no distinction between the Creator God and the created world, which denies God as a person with His Divine powers. Also, a pantheistic worldview negates the individuality of human persons. So, pantheism does not only affect God's individuality¹¹ but also human beings. Iqbal takes the renunciation of individualities in God and humans seriously.

Iqbal theorises an ego-centric concept of the universe that counters the metaphysics of pantheism, which undermines the individuality of God and human beings.¹² Iqbal argues that God and humans are individual persons. One interpretation of pantheism claims that everything that exists is a manifestation of God. If this interpretation is accurate, this means that the universe is not a creation of God but His manifestation or emanation. Pantheism implies that neither God nor humans have their individualities, and this view undermines their autonomous agencies. By negating God's individuality, pantheism denies His omniscience, omnipotence, and the ability to create. Similarly, pantheism eclipses humans's individuality, undermining their sovereignty and creativity. In other words, pantheism hinders individuals' creativity and potential, leading to human idleness.

Panentheism contrasts pantheism. Panentheism asserts that God is the Creator and the Regulator of the universe. In addition, this view also holds that God is transcendental and independent of His creation. Iqbal's philosophical problem is how to re-establish God's *Godliness* and human's *humanliness*. Iqbal replaced pantheism with panentheism and humanism to recognise the uniqueness of God and humans, respectively. Panentheism defends God's individuality, while humanism defends human's individuality embedded with creativity, freedom, knowledge, and dignity. So, panentheism supports the idea of God's *Godliness*, while humanism supports human's *humanliness* with unlimited possibilities of creativity in the world.

It is pertinent to understand how and why the concept of pantheism was developed in the Subcontinent. One of the most influential mystics was Ibn al-Arabi, who influenced the Islamic world, mainly the Indian Muslims. Iqbal rightly understood that the pantheistic worldview had influenced the Indian people. To evaluate Iqbal's claim, I consider two questions: first, does the pantheistic worldview exist in South Asia? Second, if pantheism existed in South Asia, how did it adversely affect its people? To address the first question, I draw on William C. Chittick's work, "Notes on Ibn al-Arabi's Influence in the Subcontinent." Chittick explains that Ibn al-Arabi's writings have had a significant impact on the Muslims of the Subcontinent. One of the key ideas attributed to Ibn al-Arabi is the concept of *wahdat al-wujud*, which refers to the Oneness of Being.¹³ Although Ibn al-Arabi never used the term *wahdat al-wujud* himself, his followers gradually adopted it to describe his position.¹⁴ Through research from the 14th to 19th centuries, Chittick discovered that the idea of *wahdat al-wujud* existed in the Subcontinent. Yet, he also found that Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi developed a corrective notion, as an alternative perspective, known as *wahdat al-shuhud*.¹⁵ Similarly, Annmarie Schimmel, in her work entitled, *Islam in India and Pakistan*, holds that Ibn al-Arabi's idea of *wahdat al-wujud* largely influenced the Indian people.¹⁶

Hence, pantheistic metaphysics adversely affected the Muslim world and the Subcontinent. This pantheistic metaphysics made people non-responsive to their social, moral, and political conducts. This non-responsive conduct of people makes them idle and worthless. They believe that human persons are helpless before God's will, and to make this world better through their actions is not their choice. Notably, pantheistic philosophy not only undermines God's but also human's power of creation. To develop the correct view of God's and human's powers, Iqbal develops the idea of

egohood. Let us see what Iqbal's theory of egohood is in the following section.

3. The Metaphysics of Egohood

Iqbal's metaphysics explains that all reality, including God, humans and the universe, consists of egos. An ego is an ontological substance. Iqbal not only affirms the reality of the ego but also explains its nature. He adopts a Persian expression, '*Khudi*', for egohood, selfhood, and I-amness. In Persian, '*khudi*' has a bad connotation, which refers to selfishness, immodesty, or vanity.¹⁷ In the Preface to his Persian poem, *Asrar-i-Khudi* (The Secrets of the Self), Iqbal explains that *Khudi* does not mean vanity but refers to self-awareness or self-determination.¹⁸ Iqbal needs a neutral expression, which could explain the metaphysical "indescribable feeling [psychological states or experiences] of 'I', which forms the basis of the uniqueness of each individual."¹⁹ According to Iqbal, this 'I' is the unity of an individual's mental state.²⁰ In *Asrar-i-Khudi*, Iqbal formulates two claims: first, *khudi* is the substance of the universe.²¹ This claim asserts that egos are the basis of all existence, which creates the cosmological structure of the universe. Second, *khudi* is a central fact in the constitution of human persons.²² So, egos constitute the existence of the universe and human beings.

What is this thing called ego? In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal puts a set of metaphysical questions: "What is the character and general structure of the universe in which we live? Is there a permanent element in the constitution of this universe? How are we related to it? What place do we occupy in it, and what is the kind of conduct that befits the place we occupy?"²³ In general, these questions investigate the nature of the substance of the universe. In Iqbal's metaphysical system, the substance that constitutes the universe is ego. According to Iqbal, each ego has its independent reality but bears three essential characteristics: individuality, uniqueness and privacy.

Individuality is an essential feature of an ego. Iqbal holds that the development of every person's individuality is the primary goal of nature.²⁴ Individuality is an antidote to collectivism in the Islamic tradition. The egos in the universe are individual entities. The ego does not lose its individuality. Javed Majeed writes, "The kernel of his conception of selfhood is the contention that as human selves approach God, rather than losing their individuality, they become more strongly individuated."²⁵ In the Sufi tradition, it is believed that human persons cannot retain their individualities while experiencing a beatific vision of God. They lose their individualities

in God like a drop of water loses its individuality in an ocean. Iqbal's ego is like a pearl, not a drop of water, which does not lose its individuality in water.²⁶ Hence, Iqbal's main thrust is that the individuality of the ego has an independent existence in the world.

Uniqueness is another salient feature of the ego. The ego, the unity of mental states, is unique because it does not resemble the unity of material things. The space and time of ego differ from the space and time of material things. Iqbal claims that material things can exist in mutual isolation, but there is no possibility of mutual isolation in mental states because they involve one another.²⁷ Iqbal states:

We cannot say that one of my beliefs is situated on the right or left of my other belief. Nor is it possible to say that my appreciation of the beauty of the Taj varies with my distance from Agra. My thought of space is not spatially related to space. Indeed, the ego can think of more than one space-order. The space of waking consciousness and dream-space have no mutual relation. They do not interfere with or overlap each other. For the body there can be but a single space. The ego, therefore, is not space-bound in the sense in which the body is space bound. Again, mental and physical events are both in time, but the timespan of the ego is fundamentally different from the timespan of the physical event. The duration of the physical event is stretched out in space as a present fact; the ego's duration is concentrated within it and linked with its present and future in a unique manner. The formation of a physical event discloses certain present marks which show that it has passed through a time-duration; but these marks are merely emblematic of its time duration, not time-duration itself. True time duration belongs to the ego alone.²⁸

Mental unity is unique because time and space impact it differently than they do on material unity.

Privacy is also an essential feature of the ego.²⁹ To expound the idea of privacy, Iqbal distinguishes between two kinds of selves: the appreciative self and the efficient self. These selves create the ego's intrinsic and extrinsic aspects, respectively. The efficient self faces the spatial-temporal level of reality because it deals with causal relationships in this world. For instance, the efficient self finds the relationship between clouds and rain. The appreciative self is an intrinsic self linked to the inner self of human personality. Iqbal uses William James's idea of "stream of thought"³⁰ to explain this inner experience. Privacy refers to the inner experience of the ego, that is, the appreciative self. Thus, the ego is related to the feelings of personal life, the inner human microcosm.

Iqbal's ego-centric metaphysical approach helps explain his notion of ontological pluralism. Iqbal's ontology of the universe comprises three levels of reality: matter, life and consciousness. These levels represent the disciplines of physics, biology, and psychology, respectively.³¹ Physics and biology investigate the questions of the material world. Physics looks at the material non-sentient objects while biology enquires into life in the world. As an empirical science, physics studies the material world of the earth, sky, mountains, chairs and tables.³² Biology investigates life in plants, animals and human persons. Psychology investigates the nature of consciousness. So, each ego is unique, individual and autonomous.

In addition, Iqbal distinguishes two kinds of egos to demonstrate different levels of reality: an infinite Supreme Ego and a set of finite egos. Iqbal holds that Supreme Ego is the cause of finite egos. According to Iqbal, the Supreme Ego is God. The Supreme Ego causes the creation of finite egos, just as light emanates from the Sun.³³ Although finite egos emanate from the Supreme Ego, all egos possess the same ontological reality. There is no difference between God's Ego and created egos except their degrees of perfection. What makes an ego more or less perfect is creativity and freedom. "God is a Perfect Ego, the Perfect Self, or the Perfect Individual"³⁴ because He is the great Creator with absolute freedom.

4. Egohood and Its Applications

Iqbal develops his theory of selfhood to explain his numerous positions, including social philosophy, moral philosophy, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of life. In the realm of social philosophy, Iqbal's ontology of egohood explains two kinds of interrelated egos: the individual and collective egos³⁵. Iqbal holds that individual egos are not independent of collective egos. Egos interact with other egos and share common experiences. He states, "We appreciate the ego itself in the act of perceiving, judging, and willing. 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 experience."³⁶ Thus, Iqbal's social philosophy adequately explains the individual's relationship with the society.

Iqbal's theory of egohood helps explain moral philosophy. Moral philosophy explains the ideas of duties and rights in a society. People have a moral responsibility to make this world better and more peaceful. An individual

has certain rights and duties. The ego as an individual and the holistic ego as a society creates a balance between rights and duties. In political philosophy, Iqbal's theory of egohood helps explain people's political actions in a society. Each individual has the potential to act to make a better society. Iqbal holds that individuals are God's vicegerent on Earth, and they ought to play their political role to make this world a better place to live in.

Regarding the philosophy of religion, Iqbal's theory of egohood helps explain the nature of the relationship between the individual and God. Iqbal states that the Supreme Ego and finite egos have a particular relationship. The Supreme Ego is nothing but God, the source of finite egos in the universe, just like light emits from the Sun.³⁷ Finite egos spring from the Supreme Ego. All egos hold the same ontological reality. God's Ego and His created egos are the same but different in degrees. Creativity and freedom make ego less or more perfect.

What is the philosophy of life? Iqbal argues that human life is a series of actions in the social world. These actions are directed primarily by directive purpose. According to Iqbal, the nature of the ego is purposive. Iqbal's theory of egohood holds that egos have psychological motives, such as desires, aspirations, passions, and emotions, which animate the world. These psychological motives make the world dynamic rather than static because all egos want to satisfy their desires. Living egos are full of passions, emotions, and aspirations. This is a psychological world of motives.

5. Conclusion

This article explained Muhammad Iqbal's theory of egohood. Indeed, Iqbal's entire philosophical corpus is based on his theory of egohood. Iqbal's theory of egohood is a metaphysical theory explaining the nature of God, humans, and the universe. Much literature on Iqbal's theory of egohood has been produced, but it is onerous to comprehend it. I have explained Iqbal's theory of egohood with its three aspects: Why did he develop such a theory? This is a significant question that helps understand the theory. I explained that Iqbal wanted to debunk the metaphysics of pantheism, which undermined individuality, particularly action in the human realm.

The second question is, what is Iqbal's theory of egohood? To reject the metaphysics of pantheism, Iqbal's developed his metaphysical theory of egohood, which takes the ego as a substance. This substance of ego in Iqbal's thought refers to 'individuality'. Pantheism affects not only humans but also God's individuality. To give a metaphysical correct explanation, Iqbal's

theory of egohood strengthened the idea of individuality in both the Divine and the human sense. Iqbal declares humans as God's vicegerents on Earth, who acquire Divine attributes such as creativity and knowledge. One of the prominent ideas in Iqbal's philosophy is that God and humans collaborate to create the universe.

The third question investigates what Iqbal wanted to infer from his theory of egohood. With his theory of egohood, Iqbal explains his social, moral, political, and religious philosophy. Iqbal's theory of egohood helps explain the relationship between the individual and society, the ethical responsibilities of the individual, the political responsibilities of the state, the spiritual aspect of religion, and the individual's relationship with the universe. Thus, the article explained a tripartite account of Iqbal's theory of egohood: the rationale, exposition, and application of his theory of egohood to his other philosophical strands.

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