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A Study Of Epistemic Reality In The Philosophy Of Allama Iqbal

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Abstract: This study explores the concept of epistemic reality in the philosophy of Allama Muhammad Iqbal, with a special focus on his reconstruction of Islamic thought and his synthesis of reason, intuition and revelation as sources of knowledge. Iqbal's concept of reality is not a static, but a dynamic, living process that reveals itself through human experience and self-realization. For Iqbal, knowledge arises from both empirical aspect with the phenomenal world and the transcendental illumination of the self through Divine consciousness. In this paper, I will try to explain how Iqbal reconciles the empirical and spiritual forms of knowledge. According to him, ultimate reality cannot be apprehended through rational inquiry; rather, it is realized through the profound experiential union of the human ego (Khudi). Thus, Iqbal criticizes Western epistemology, especially the separation of subject and object and emphasizes the Quranic view of knowledge. The study concludes that Iqbal's concept of epistemic reality transcends both materialist empiricism and abstract idealism, proposing instead an integrative model in which knowing is an act of becoming which an evolutionary movement of the self toward Divine Reality.

Keywords: Epistemology, Knowledge, Khudi, Ultimate Reality, Empirical and Transcendental

Introduction

How do we know what is real? - This epistemological question has shaped the very foundation of metaphysics. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, this inquiry is not merely speculative; it is deeply existential and spiritual. Knowledge (*ilm*) is considered not only the apprehension of facts but the means of realizing the Divine. Among modern Muslim thinkers, Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) stands out as one of the most profound voices who reinterpreted traditional Islamic epistemology in light of modern philosophical perspective. His Philosophical works "*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*" represents an attempt to reconcile the empirical spirit of modern science with the transcendental insight of Islamic revelation.

Iqbal's conception of epistemic reality arises from his conviction that *reality is dynamic, creative, and alive*. For him, knowledge is not a static correspondence between the mind and external objects but an active engagement between the self (*ego* or *khudi*) and the universe. He explains, "The universe is not a thing but an act," which means knowledge is a participatory process within the unfolding act of creation. Unlike the rationalist philosophers, Iqbal refuses to separate knowing from being. He emphasizes that to know something truly is to participate in its creative becoming. Thus, epistemology and ontology are inextricably linked to his philosophy.

In Iqbal's epistemology, there are two complementary dimensions of knowing: the empirical and the transcendental. The empirical dimension pertains to sense experience and rational inquiry, which Iqbal fully accepts as valid modes of understanding to the phenomenal world. However, he regards them as incomplete without the transcendental or spiritual dimension which is intuition and revelation. True knowledge, according to Iqbal, arises from the integration of these two dimensions, culminating in the direct experience of Divine Reality. In his view, "The knowledge of God is not merely inferential; it is an immediate experience of the heart" (*Reconstruction* 66). Thus Iqbal rejected both Western empiricism and idealism view of reality. According to him, sense perception alone cannot reveal reality as well as reality

is not confined to mental constructs. Reality manifests itself through creative activity. His synthesis, therefore, seeks to ground epistemic reality in a dynamic relationship between the human self and the Absolute Self (God). As M.M. Sharif observes, “For Iqbal, the act of knowing is at once empirical and spiritual; the self knows through participating in the life of Reality” (*About Iqbal and His Thoughts* 18).

Knowledge and Reality

For Iqbal, knowledge is not merely a rational ground but a creative and experiential act that connects human consciousness with the deeper formation of reality. His epistemology, therefore, cannot be understood apart from his metaphysics. He says, the ultimate aim of the ego is not to see something, but to be something. As Iqbal’s reality is dynamic, he rejects the mechanistic worldview of classical science that sees the universe as a closed system governed by immutable laws. Instead, he draws upon both the Qur’anic worldview and the philosophy of Henri Bergson to assert that reality is an ongoing process of *creative evolution*. Iqbal interprets knowledge as the ego’s way of participating in this divine creativity. According to him, “The universe is not a thing but an act; it is the self-revelation of the Ultimate Ego” (*Reconstruction* 48). Knowledge, in this sense, is not detached observation but active co-creation with the Divine. Iqbal’s epistemology thus stands in contrast to the Western dualism of subject and object. The act of knowing does not separate the knower from the known but unites them in a living relationship. This is why he claims that *knowledge is not representational but participatory*. Thus, for Iqbal, in the act of knowledge, subject and object, knower and the known becomes one. This unity occurs because of the human ego (*khudi*) which reflects the creative power of God. Man, as vicegerent (*khalifah*) of God on earth, is endowed with an epistemic capacity to discover and transform reality. Therefore, according to Iqbal, knowledge is both a divine trust and a moral responsibility. It is not value neutral but teleologically oriented toward the realization of the self and the completion of Divine purpose.

The Qur’anic Basis of Knowledge

Iqbal’s epistemology firmly rooted in the Qur’anic concept of knowledge (*ilm*) as a sacred act and a sign of Divine favor. The very first revelation, “Read in the name of thy Lord who created” (*Al-Qur’an*, 96:1). According to Iqbal this as evidence that Islam is a religion of inquiry, not dogmatic submission. As he said, “Islam demands the reconstruction of life on a basis of knowledge derived from experience and reflection” (*Reconstruction* 6).

For Iqbal, the Qur’anic vision of knowledge integrates both the empirical and the transcendental. The natural world (*alam al-shahadah*) is a field for scientific exploration, while the spiritual world (*alam al-ghayb*) is accessible through intuition and revelation. Both realms, however, point toward the same Divine Reality. As he writes, “To the Muslim, God is the ultimate ground of all that is; therefore, the scientific study of Nature is essentially a religious act” (*Reconstruction* 121).

Thus, Iqbal’s epistemology rejects the Western tendency to separate science from spirituality. He insists that the same Divine Light illuminates both the world of matter and the world of spirit. In his view, “There is no such thing as profane knowledge; all knowledge is sacred in the eyes of God” (*About Iqbal and His Thoughts* 23). This unity of knowledge reflects the Qur’anic principle of *tawhid* (the oneness of all existence).

The Role of Reason and Intuition

Iqbal distinguishes between two modes of knowing: reason (*‘aql*) and intuition (*ishraq* or *kashf*). Reason, he acknowledges, is essential for organizing experience and advancing science, but it remains limited to the phenomenal realm. Intuition, on the other hand, provides access to the inner meaning of reality. Iqbal explains, “Reason is analytic; it unfolds the given. Intuition is synthetic; it grasps the whole” (*Reconstruction* 68). This does not mean that Iqbal dismisses reason. Rather, he envisions an amalgamation of reason and intuition. Both are necessary for the complete apprehension of Ultimate Reality. Thus, the Qur’an encourages the exercise of intellect (*tafakkur*, *tadabbur*) and simultaneously recognizes the necessity of spiritual insight (*basirah*). True knowledge arises when reason and intuition cooperate under the light of revelation (*wahy*).

Iqbal draws here on the legacy of Islamic mysticism (Sufism), particularly the thought of Rumi and al-Ghazali. Yet, he diverges from traditional mysticism by rejecting the idea of complete withdrawal from the world. For him, the mystic’s vision must return to transform life. The purpose of the mystic’s experience is not to escape from the universe but to return to it with a transformed consciousness. Hence, knowledge is not only contemplative but creative and practical.

Reality as Organic and Spiritual

Iqbal's metaphysical vision of reality profoundly shapes his epistemology. He conceives reality as organic, spiritual, and ever-evolving. In contrast to mechanistic materialism, he claims that reality cannot be reduced to matter or motion; it is essentially spiritual energy. He observes, "The ultimate nature of reality is spiritual, and the universe is a free creative movement of the Ultimate Ego" (*Reconstruction* 47). Therefore, the act of knowing is itself a spiritual act, for the knower participates in the same divine energy that sustains existence. Knowledge, then, becomes a means of self-realization. Thus, the highest knowledge is self-knowledge leading to God-knowledge

The Role of the Ego (Khudi) in Knowing Reality

In Iqbal's system, knowledge is not a passive reflection but an active expression of the *ego* (*khudi*). The human self is not just a spectator in the cosmic plan but a co-creator. The *khudi* participates in the divine act of creation by discovering and shaping reality through its own effort. Iqbal declares, "The knowledge of God is not the knowledge of an object, but the self's knowledge of its own deeper reality." (*Reconstruction* 103)

Thus, epistemic activity is inseparable from self-realization. The more the self strengthens its individuality through action, the clearer its perception of truth becomes. Weak selves cannot know the Real; only strong, disciplined egos can penetrate to the core of existence.

This is why Iqbal says,

"Khudī ko kar buland itnā, ke har taqdīr se pahle

Khudā bande se pūchhe, batā terī razā kyā hai!" (*Asrar-e-Khudi* 52)

To know God, man must first affirm his own selfhood. Therefore, empirical study (through science and reason) builds the intellect, while transcendental insight (through intuition and love) elevates the soul. Together they form the full epistemic development of the *khudi* (*Ego*). This synthesis helps man to fulfill his divinely appointed role as *vicegerent* (*khalifah*) of God.

Iqbal envisions human knowledge as a progressive movement from sense perception to rational reflection, and finally to spiritual vision. This threefold structure corresponds to the levels of reality itself; material, vital, and spiritual. To Iqbal, Experience manifests itself at three levels; the level of matter, the level of life, and the level of mind. The study of these fields, Physics, Biology, and Psychology leads us to the nature of Ultimate Reality. This gradual ascent of knowledge mirrors the evolution of consciousness. In the empirical stage, man observes and experiments and in the rational stage, he organizes and interprets information but the transcendental stage, man intuitively feels the unity of all existence. This unity is not conceptual but existential, which is felt in the heart, not merely thought in the mind. For this reason, Iqbal states that the goal of knowledge is not to describe reality but to realize it. So he transforms epistemology into a form of spiritual practice. Knowing is becoming. The more deeply one knows, the more one participates in the divine act of being.

Conclusion:

Iqbal's conception of knowledge is thus deeply holistic. He sees no contradiction between science and religion, intellect and intuition, or matter and spirit. All forms of knowing converge toward the realization of the Ultimate Reality (God). In this regard Fazlur Rahman said, "For Iqbal, knowledge is an aspect of the movement of reality itself; it is the self's way of realizing its divine potential" (*Islam and Modernity* 91). Knowledge, therefore, is not a means to mastery over nature but a sacred journey toward unity with the Creative Source.

Iqbal's theory of knowledge also bridges the gulf between empiricism and transcendentalism. His epistemology begins with observation and ends with realization, combining the outer discipline of science with the inner illumination of mysticism. As Annemarie Schimmel observes, "Iqbal's epistemology is the spiritualization of science and the rationalization of mysticism" (*Gabriel's Wing* 242).

Thus, for Iqbal, knowledge is sacred because it is the self's participation in God's eternal creativity. Empirical inquiry reveals the signs of God in the world; transcendental insight reveals His presence within the self. When both are harmonized, man attains the completeness of Divine Reality.

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