

## **Individual and Society: A Socio- Philosophical Account of Iqbal's thought**

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### **Abstract**

There are so many long debates on the puzzle of individual and society. Some people favor that individual is the basic unit of society so main focus should be individual. Others favor the main importance of the society. The purpose of this paper is to address these two extremes. The paper addresses these questions: Is the controversy of individual and society a solvable issue or not? What are those social aspects which make an individual civilized? Can individual survive as a mere individual having no connection with any society? What are the benefits which an individual can only have from a society? All these questions will be analyzed with the thought of Allama Muhammad Iqbal that how he deals with the relationship of individual and society.

**Keywords:** Individual, Society, Self, Ego, Consciousness, Atomism, Holism, Potentiality, Actuality.

### **What is an Individual?**

- Is individual a unique independently existing being having no relationship with society?
- Is society in itself an independently existing entity?

These and many similar questions are usually raised and answered. Social scientists are in search of answers of these questions from the day they realized that individual as a member of society is a conscious being.

“Man, being self- conscious and rational, has theories about himself and his social conditions which profoundly affect his behavior; theories which have not been, are not, and never will be merely scientific. They will always be more than explanation of how he behaves and how his institutions function.”(Plamenatz, 1963, p. xx)

### **Different Views regarding Individual-Society Quandary**

There are various theories about the controversy of individual and society's relationship. According to social contract theory, society is not a natural growth but an artificial device

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by which individuals had decided some thousand years back for a social togetherness. Man was born free and he is now tangled in chains of society and society is a great hurdle in the development of individual. On the other hand a view is that society exists on its own individual uniqueness, apart from the individuals, who are basic units of it.

Aristotle is an advocate of the position where human beings live together not only for the sake of reproduction but some other purposes of life. On the other hand modern sociologist Durkheim holds that social facts are given to the individual by the society and these facts also have a deep effect on the thinking and actions of individuals. Due to the pressure of social factors, individuals work in an organized and established way.

These two extreme positions do not play any type of positive role neither in the development of individual nor of society. One way to tackle this problem is purely philosophical and the other is sociological though at bases both are united in an organic whole. Every individual on his own level feels that he is a unique being having a unique personality and he is here to fulfill a great purpose. This self-awareness keeps him busy to probe into the mysteries of life, external environment and future. He has a privileged access to his consciousness. This privileged access makes him aware about the possibilities of mental and social development. He confronts other forces, in the form of material as well as other individuals. These forces resist him to complete and achieve his great purpose. There are 'others' in the universe having their own purposes and goals. This is a position of clash with other selves, but this is not a negative thing. Here is an effort within and outwards very necessary for the development of individual.

Iqbal (1982) writes:-

“When attracted by the forces around him, man has the power to shape and direct them; when thwarted by them, he has the capacity to build much vaster world in the depths of his own inner being, wherein he discovers sources of infinite joy and inspiration.”  
(p. 9-10)

As a conscious and rational being, man has the power to make his goals and purposes to be fulfilled by his efforts. He has the power to face and control the external forces and tame them according to his own wishes and desires. Iqbal (1982) thus describes in an impressive way:-

“It is the lot of man to share in the deeper aspirations of universe around him and to shape his own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself to its forces, now by putting the whole of his energy to mould its forces to his own ends and purposes.”(p. 10)

We at our individual level are different and separate from others; a self-contained, and essentially independent entities. In the language of social science this position is named 'atomism'. Just like the atomism theory, where an atom is the basic unit of the whole structure of matter. According to this theory each of us experiences our own unique states of consciousness. We having our own consciousness, at the same time only we ourselves

have the privileged access to ourselves. Here are some words of immense importance to clear the point said by Popey:

“I yam what I yam and that’s all I yam” (Fay, 2003, p.30)

## **Modern Views**

Modern Philosophy of social science and sociological readings suggest that individuals are different from other members of social structure. They are only related to them externally. Sociologists who believe in atomism take individual as a separate individual with his own unique state of consciousness, desires, wishes and needs of his own self. This is just like the Leibniz’s theory of monads which states:-

“No two monads, he held, can ever have any casual relation to each other; when it seems as if they had, appearances are deceptive. Monads, as he expressed it, are ‘windowless” (Russell, 1961, p. 565)

Windowless monads mean that each monad is self-existent and independent. There is no interaction among the monads. They are mirroring the universe in their own way prescribed by the nature.

## **Questions to be discussed**

- But the question is; is it true that we as individuals are tightly closed in air tight compartments?
- What is this compartment called self?
- Is there any relationship between self and others?

Answering these questions is the main point to be discussed to justify the topic of this article. Let us tackle the problem of ‘self’ first. The concept of self is of utmost importance to deal the problem on philosophical as well as sociological grounds.

## **What is Self?**

What we call self is only a representation of consciousness. What is this consciousness? The answer to this question is my desires, my perception and my experiences, though all these could be reduced to some internal and external stimuli. In fact our personality is always entangled in a Catherine- wheel. The human behavior is more than a respond towards stimuli. The human nervous system is so much complicated that the multifaceted activities which we as individuals perform cannot be demoted to a certain type of behavioral responses only. There are certain viewpoints which do not assert on individual having self. David Hume (1964) is one of the representatives who says:

“For my part, when I enter most intimately what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, heat or cold, light or shade,

love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.....but setting aside some metaphysics of this kind, I may venture of the rest of mankind, that they are the thing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and one in a perpetual flux and movement..... The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, surpass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations”(p. 252-253)

According to Hume, desires, feelings and thoughts exist in the form of bundles. The question is that is it possible for feelings and thoughts to exist without any owner? My pain is very much my pain and other person cannot understand the harshness of my pain. What distinguishes my pain and pain of others? Second point is when Hume says:

“I never catch myself.....what is this ‘I’ he is talking about?”(Begum, 2003, p. 55)

Selves are not items like beds, trees and tables. Selves can look into themselves as another to asses, to accept or reject or change what they perceive.

“A self- conscious creature is one which is itself the object of its own reflections and assessment” (Fay, 2003, p. 35)

### Iqbal’s View on Self

Iqbal is of the view that man is a possessor of creative self and this ability of creativity distinguishes man from other creatures. Man himself creates his surroundings. When man becomes aware about the inside power of self, this is self-realization. He feels that he can get control over nature. In this way he becomes the author of his destiny.

اپنی دنیا آپ پیدا کر کے زندوں میں ہے  
رہز آدوم ہے، ضمیر کن نکال ہے زندگی

(Iqbal, 1998, p.277/261)

“Consider the use of pronoun ‘I’. At first it might seem that when we make remarks like ‘I believe that’ we refer to a pre-existing object (the I or the self). The pronoun ‘I’ seems to refer in these locations to an independent thing, just as the pronoun ‘you’ refers to the person to whom you are speaking and ‘it’ refers to the object.”(Fay, 2003, p. 38)

This ‘I’ in Iqbal’s Philosophy is ‘ego’. This ‘ego’ or ‘I’ does not live unaccompanied. Full realization is only possible in the presence of others. Other members of the society

shape and fix their norms and purposes. Thus society plays a vital role to pave the way for individual towards his destination.

“The involvement of others is crucial in other ways. Consider self-development. Becoming a person is in part the process of acquiring a set of norms and ideals which defined one’s role in a pattern of social relation” (Fay, 2003, p. 40)

Our behaviors, feelings and desires are shaped by external social principles and our intentions which seem to be private are not private in its true sense. They are constituted out of social practices, rules and roles of institutions.

### **Plato and Aristotle’s Views**

Plato has given a great importance to harmony between individual and society. For Plato harmony and balance is justice. An individual should fulfill his duties which are assigned to him and in this way he is doing justice to society. Thus both individual and society will keep balance. Justice to him is keeping balance in three parts of the soul which are *appetite, spirit and reason* and the similar three parts of the society (*polis*).

Aristotle has full realization of the significance of individual and society relationship. He has classified man as a social animal.

“He is fully aware of the importance and indispensability of the role which society plays in the life of an individual. Society is, therefore, natural to man for his true nature can only develop in a social group. Man has a natural urge for companionship” (Chaudhri, 2005, p. 22)

### **Reciprocal relationship between Individual and Society**

It is important to note that individual enters into another individual and that is society. Society itself is an individual at large perspective. Therefore, it is suitable to say that individuals make society and society produces individuals. In society one learns to be an individual by fulfilling the social demands and needs. An individual takes the benefits from the society such as his identification as a citizen and his recognition as a member of the different institutions of the society. On the other hand, we see that individuals together form a society in which they share common culture and heritage. Therefore, we can say that individual and society are not a separable fact rather these two are sides of the same coin.

“To live is to shape and change ends and purposes and to be governed by them. Mental life is teleological in the sense that, while there is no far off distant goal towards which we are moving, there is a progressive formation of fresh ends, purposes and ideal scales of value as the process of life grows and expands.”(Iqbal, 1982, p. 43-44)

## Islamic Perspective

While looking this problem in another way, we come across the truth that in Quran man is designated the status of co-worker of God on the earth.

Quran says:-

وَهُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَكُمْ خَلَائِفَ الْأَرْضِ وَرَفَعَ بَعْضَكُمْ فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ  
دَرَجَاتٍ لِيُبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ سَرِيعُ الْعِقَابِ وَإِنَّهُ لَغَفُورٌ  
رَّحِيمٌ

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

Individual has to play a very important role. The purpose of Islam is to establish a peaceful society in which individual can use his practical self which is in Iqbal's word “efficient self” in order to shape his personality. Self-development is very much necessary for the development of individual and society.

“It is the unique privilege of a grown personality constantly to look within and mold the patterns of his behavior in the ever changing circumstances of life in the light of ultimate goals and purposes which symbolize the very life-soul of his society”(Habib, 1985, p. 104)

There is reciprocal relationship between individual and society. It is not true that man was born free and innocent and afterwards he was tied in the chains of society. Social institutions are nothing but only a program to organize and set the purposes and norms for the individual development. Holists are of the opinion that society is standing on the unique standpoint of its own not depending on individual for the existence. Individual as a human being could not be human without being a member of a social set up.

“Individuality and sociality are not mutually exclusive but collectively determine the growth of personality as well as society” (Habib, 1985, p. 106)

Individual is simply social individual. Individual is not a person having two selves. One is individual and the other is social rather he has only one self, having two aspects, one is very much internal and the other is related to external world named ‘appreciative and efficient self’ respectively. Iqbal(1982) says:-

“A keener insight into the nature of conscious experience however reveals that the self in its inner life moves from center to outward” (p. 38)

The self is not a sole individual rather it is woven individuality and sociality. It cannot remain without its link with its external circumstances. Iqbal says:-

فرد تمام ربط ملت سے ہے تنہا کچھ نہیں  
موج ہے دریا میں اور سیرِ ن دریا کچھ نہیں

(Iqbal, 1998, p. 217/201)

Iqbal (1982) presents this thought as:

“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.”(p. 82)

### Iqbal's View

According to Iqbal individual and society are part and parcel of each other. Individual depends on society for his survival and society plays a supportive role. Iqbal states:

“This self is personality woven of individuality and sociality both of which develop side by side.”(Habib, 1985, p. 106)

The existence of others is unavoidable to mould and shape our social personhood. There are two points to be noted, two terms to be explained to make understandable .One is individuality and other is sociality. By individuality we mean having certain self which is composed of our individual wishes, desires, passions and intentions. These are the things which are self-directing and self-determined. Now the question to be tackled with is where one individual is going to utilize this self-direction and self-determination. The ultimate answer is, in society. Therefore social togetherness is a necessary quality of individual. Individual is individual but in a sociological terms. Every individual is born having certain potentialities. He is the possessor of a creative self. The self develops itself under certain social conditions.

“The development of human Ego when translated into social consciousness leads to what can be termed as collective ego” (Chaudhri, 2005, p. 118)

This is a blessing for an individual to be a member of a society. This is the completion of a natural desire of an individual to live with other fellowmen. Society contributes to enhance his quality of humanness by fixing the goals and purposes to be fulfilled.

فرد را ربط جماعت است  
جوهر او را کمال از ملت است

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“The individual is the real unit of society and the value and the worth of society consists in the extent to which its individuals realize their personalities in it. Individuality and society are not mutually exclusive but collectively determine the growth of personality as well as society.”(Dar, 1971, p. 184)

Individual gets his self-esteem while being a member of a society and at the same time society organize itself through its members.

An individual becomes ripe  
Only by the heat of “society” (Tariq,  
1977, p. 11)

Society gives a proper shape to the individual.

“If a society sincerely depicts its component egos, it can find ways and means that are suitable for synthesizing different and sometimes conflicting Egos into a dynamic Collective Ego”(Chaudhri, 2005, p. 118)  
(Iqbal, 1973, p. 85)

This is the point where the individual finds the ways to utilize his abilities for the betterment of his society. He has the power to mould the forces of the universe by adjusting himself with them. To Iqbal only a social man can get the crown of creation and the master of the universe.

“A harmonious growth of an individual is not possible without society.”(Dar, 1971, p. 184)  
(Iqbal, 1973, p. 86)

Iqbal (1982) writes:-

فرد می گیرد ز ملت احترام  
ملت از افراد می یابد نظام

“It is the lot of man to share in the deeper aspirations of the universe around him and to shape his own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself to its forces, now by putting the whole of his energy to mould its forces to his own ends and purposes”(p. 10)

فرد تا اندر جماعت گم شود  
قطره ی وسعت طلب قلزم شود

(Iqbal, 1973. P. 86)

In fact society fixes the roles and rules for individuals. The dignity and respect of individual is linked with obeying and adopting these roles and rules. Iqbal has a deep insight and he has expressed it in a very impressive way. He is recognized as a poet having a philosophical outlook. He himself is the product of his own environment. He addresses individual as a member of society. He is not only convinced about the uniqueness of



individual but society as well. The relationship between individual and society develops not in a vacuum. It works in a reciprocal manner.

Society is real and always endeavors to realize the potentialities of the individual. It works as a platform where an individual unfolds his potentialities in such a way that he can develop into a wonderful as well as useful member of society.

Iqbal (1982) has pointed out that all types of prayer serve the purpose of sociality. Thus he signifies his point by saying:-

“The real object of prayer is better achieved when the act of prayer becomes congregational. The spirit of all true prayer is social.....A congregation is an association of men who, animated by the same aspiration’ concentrate themselves on a single object and open up their inner selves to the working of a single impulse.”(p. 73)

Psychologically speaking individuals when united, work more effectively. We can observe its demonstration in terms of collective prayers.

Consider Iqbal’s (1982) words:-

“It is psychological truth that association multiplies the normal man’s power of perception, deepens his emotion, and dynamizes his will to a degree unknown to hi in the privacy of his individuality” (p. 73)

## Conclusion

Thus it is clear enough that an individual fully realizes his own self only in a society. In Aristotelian version an individual can change his potentiality into actuality only when he would be the member of a society. As a rational and moral being individual is making and facing the society at the same time.

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