

## ONTOLOGY OF SELF A Prelude to a Meaningful and Positive Encounter with the Other

ABSAR AHMAD\*

**Abstract.** It has been stated that *pace* older traditional epistememes, man in contemporary analytic philosophy has come to be seen as the creature of science leading to the death of man as an autonomous substance which has led to many philosophical quandaries. It has been argued that fading away of the person or self in the mass of events is unacceptable to a number of philosophers and even some scientists. Views of Allama Iqbal on the spiritual nature of Reality and of human self are mirrored more recently by Paul Ricoeur and Henry Margenau. The spiritual and non-local view of human agent, it is contented, makes the entire world with its myriad beings and objects a place of interaction and connection, not of isolation and disjunction and thus one is saved from both morbid alienation and loneliness. Instead of facing difficulties in the encounter of the 'other', the entire world is experienced as friendly under the overarching unity of God.

Encountering is obviously a two-term relation and the title of this article, to my mind, rather unduly highlights the "other". Without being too much egoistic or falling prey to the so-called ego-centric predicament, I would venture to opine that the contemporary man is too much engrossed indeed immersed in the realm of the other and never has the time for self knowledge or true and genuine encounter with his own inner self or

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\*Dr. Absar Ahmad is HEC Professor at the Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore-54590 (Pakistan).

subjectivity. It is my contention that a philosophically plausible and existentially genuine appreciation of one's true nature and inner reality and identity is a prelude to and prerequisite of, a meaningful and positive encounter and relationship with all the manifold beings constituting the realm of the other. Even at the level of the experiencing individual the modern man is all the time preoccupied and concerned with his body (even body is "other" to the self, it is lived body!) — its health, hygiene, beautification, perfume spraying etc., and hardly ever has a glimpse of his inner self.

In older traditional epistemes man was considered to be the creator of external scientific knowledge while in the present day dominant episteme he has come to be seen as the creature of science, *i.e.* the realization that the human subject as an autonomous substance or consciousness was a concept derived from the general prevailing world view of that episteme. The present episteme, particularly in its contemporary Anglo-American version of linguistic and logical analysis, has marked the death of man as a spiritual, non-local experiencing subject. The triumphs of modern science have gone to man's head in something of the way rum does, causing him to grow loose in his logic. He has come to think that what science discovers somehow casts doubt on things it does not discover; that the success it realizes in its own domain throws into question the reality of domains its devices cannot touch. In short, he came to assume that science implies scientism: the belief that no realities save ones that conform to matrices science works with — space, time, matter/energy, and in the end number — exist. In this perspective the relation between the subject and other existents becomes one of mastery, subjugation and exploitation: husbandry, agriculture, the economic arts and natural/ecological devastation. Ontology becomes an ontology of nature, of an impersonal fecundity, inexhaustible matter for things. Ontological perennial philosophy, on the contrary, is an "egology"; for example, Hegelian ontology is egological in that it recapitulates the identity of the Same at the level of the philosopher enjoying absolute knowledge. As the young Hegel himself admitted in a letter to Schelling, "there will always be, I confess, an esoteric philosophy — the idea of God as

the absolute will belong to it." Even for the French post-structuralist philosopher Paul Ricoeur,<sup>1</sup> the fading away of the person, the self, in the mass of events is unacceptable. Having established the primacy of the agent, he asks, must not the appropriate ontology move out of the radius of an ontology of events and into the orbit of an ontology of the person or self? I am personally particularly interested in Paul Ricoeur's two lectures which originally constituted part of his Gifford Lectures.<sup>2</sup> They were very significantly called, "the Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures" and "The Mandated Self". Selfhood in the mirror of the scriptures was mirrored forcefully and convincingly a few decades ago by Allama Muhammad Iqbal — poet-philosopher of the Indo-Pak subcontinent in his thought-provoking *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.<sup>3</sup> Iqbal, to use Michael Foucault's expression, employs the technique of archaeology to dig up and explore the hidden structure of the essential human identity which provides us with the right perspective from which to relate with other person and the world around us. Iqbal's credo was not just an intellectual construct: it was an experiential programme. He lived his belief that he was included in a spiritual Totality that enveloped all beings. His is not the picture of cold intellection; this is a man being moved by powerful living creative force. Iqbal's style reflects his subject; he is by turns a mystic sage, a poet and, above all, a philosopher making his point with logic. And indeed his vision and view of self leads to self/other symbiosis, not just to their relationship or dialectic.

Drawing from the latest scientific research, Iqbal synthesizes the ideas of eminent scientists such as Schrodinger, Einstein, Heisenberg and others with the time-honoured knowledge of prophets, visionaries and mystics to present a convincing case for a non-local, holistic view of mind and reality that can explain transcendental experiences. In short, he provides a philosophical case for the existence of the One Universal Mind and the human soul. Indeed in his beautiful and moving poetry he joins the company of sages and seers who have transcended the role of mere philosophers to become wise, spiritual teachers. His thought can rightly be taken as a passionate call to wake up to our inner

divinity — ways of which have been prescribed since the dawn of history and are contained within all the great spiritual traditions.

One may raise the question: Why speak of the soul in an age of science? Why suggest that there is some aspect of the psyche that is not subject to the limitations of space and time, and which might precede the birth of the body and survive its death? The main reason behind this question is that something vital has been left out of almost all the modern efforts to understand our mental life — something that counts as a first principle, without which everything is bound to be incomplete and off base.

This missing element is the mind's *non-local* nature. Virtually every modern explanation of the mind assumes that it can be found in a certain place in space and time. The spatial place to which the mind has often been fixed is the brain of an individual person; the temporal place to which it is assigned is the present moment and a single lifetime. Thus, a mind is consigned and isolated to an individual person. And, what is worse, it is thus doomed to oblivion, for with the death of the brain it must also die. These local assumptions underlie, barring a few exceptions,<sup>4</sup> almost all the Western philosophical attempts to explore and describe the human mind. Because they try to locate the mind, to fix it in time and space, they are, I believe flawed. I have made an extensive and in-depth critical study of these materialist/physicalist theories of the mind in my doctoral thesis published in 1986.<sup>5</sup>

In Iqbal's view both the rational-philosophical approach and the empirical-scientific thinking lead a serious seeker of truth to an essentially religious and spiritual view of reality. This philosophical position as developed in the *Reconstruction* can be summarized in the following three paragraphs:

1. The ultimate Reality or God is an Absolute Ego having both will and purpose in a supra-personal sense such as is beyond the comprehension of finite intellect. God being an Ego creates egos only and so the universe is nothing but a graded hierarchy of egos or monads. Human ego or non-local mind is at the highest reach of

God's creativity: nothing manifests the reality of God more than the self of man for God "breathed of His own spirit into him".

2. Material universe or the physical nature is not an illusion (*maya*) but the veritable manifestation of the Real. The phenomena of nature are the signs of God. Natural processes indicate the behaviour and character of God so much so that the laws of nature represent the habit or ways of God. I shall here quote a few lines from the *Reconstruction* which very clearly and unambiguously state Iqbal's position:

"Nor is there such a thing as purely physical level in the sense of possessing a materiality, elementally incapable of evolving the creative synthesis we call life and mind, and needing a transcendental Deity to impregnate it with the sentient and the mental. The Ultimate Ego that makes the emergent emerge is immanent in Nature, and is described by the Qur'an as 'the First and the Last, the visible and the invisible'.

3. Man is the carrier within him of the infinite possibilities, of the eternal life principle. These possibilities pertain both to the inner spiritual growth and enrichment of the human ego, and to the reshaping or remoulding of the external world. The burden of fulfilling these possibilities lies on man and informs him of the *summum bonum* of his life. Both God and man are essentially the creators of new world. By making the fullest use of his creative faculties man becomes the co-worker of God, his vicegerent or deputy on earth.

In the backdrop of these thoughts, it may be pointed out that modern man's growing sense of alienation is actually a result of his materialistic mindset, which has eliminated any possibility of believing in the reality of non-material and non-local realities — including his own inner spiritual self. As a result, he is quite willing to see his own mind undermined. Biologists, information theorists, artificial intelligence experts, and other scientists take

many different positions, which usually conflict with those of traditionally rich and profound philosophers, psychologists, and theologians. And the differences are not trivial. For some, "mind" simply does not exist. It is a "ghost in the machine", a redundant and unnecessary abstraction of events that can be fully explained in uninflated, physical terms: merely a fanciful term to describe the blind play of atoms in the brain. For others, "mind" is a "category mistake", a "confusion of explanatory levels" or an epiphenomenon or by-product of chemical actions within the brain

In my view, all these non-spiritual and local theories of the mind are not only incomplete, they are destructive. They create the illusion of death and aloneness, themselves altogether local concepts. They foster existential oppression and hopelessness by giving us an utterly false idea of our essential nature, advising us that we are contracted, limited, and mortal creatures locked inside our bodies and drifting inexorably toward the end of time. This local scenario is ghastly, and regrettable that it continues to dominate the picture put forward by most philosophers and bioscientists. If, on the contrary, as Iqbal in the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century and Henry Margenau more recently in his epoch-making book, *The Miracle of Existence* (1984),<sup>6</sup> believe that non-local mind is a reality, the world becomes a place of interaction and connection, not of isolation and disjunction. The world changes for us in the most glorious ways opening up the possibility for some measure of freedom of will escaping the determinative constraints of the physical laws of the body. The possibility for survival of bodily death also becomes meaningful. Then there is the nature of our relationship to each other: the so-called problem of the knowledge of other minds. If the mind is non-local in space and time, our interaction with each other seems a foregone conclusion. Non-local minds are merging minds, since they are not "things" that can be walled off and confined to moments in time or point-positions in space.

Moreover, if humanity really believed that non-local minds were real, an entirely new foundation for ethical and moral behaviour would ensue which would hold at least the possibility

of a radical departure from the insane ways human beings and nation-states have chronically behaved toward each other. And, further, the entire existential premise of human life might shift toward the moral and the ethical, toward the spiritual and the Holy. Non-local mind potentially leads, to borrow historian and sociologist Berman's provocative phrase, to a *re-enchantment of the world*.<sup>7</sup> And this is what Iqbal would speak of as spiritualization of nature or God-permeated nature. This discovery would strike a cord of hope about our inner nature that has been silenced in an age of science. It would stir a new vision of the human as triumphant over flesh and blood: it would anchor the human spirit once again on the side of God instead of randomness, chance and decay. It would assuage the bad conscience modern men feel when they dream of innate purposes and goals of life, to say nothing of immortality. It has the capacity to redirect our vision and restore our ability once again to feel life: the absolute status of human consciousness — consciousness as fundamental and not derivative of the physical; consciousness as infinite beyond space and time. Perhaps like the psychological affliction of agoraphobia — the fear of open places — spiritual agoraphobics have deepseated fear of vast expanses: the infiniteness of time and space suggested by non-local mind. They feel safer when things are closed in, finite, and "local" — such as a mind that is confined to the individual brain and body, and a mind that stays put in the here-and-now. A mind that is soulless.

Leaving the older generation of scientists like Schrodinger, Godel and Einstein, I have in this paper mentioned a contemporary scientist, distinguished among his colleagues for making fundamental contribution to his discipline, who has openly declared the most robust and breath-taking statements to appear in many years — that the mind is one and universal. His book is not just a book about physics, it is a book about God. "Unity", "oneness", "non-locality" are a staple in the everyday diet of the poet and the mystic. But how can physicists speak today about such matters? Have the physicists gone mystic?

I shall here very briefly and sketchily mention some ideas from Margenau in a few paragraphs:

1. Even a school pupil knows that there is an amazing consistency and unity in nature. All oxygen atoms, and all atoms of a given type have the same mass or weight. All electrons have the same mass, spin and charge, which reflects an accuracy that could never be achieved in man-made things, and this is true for all properties of the known elementary constituents of matter. When we find this sameness and unity in the macroscopic, everyday world — for example, the fact that coins and paper bills are of the same value, that automobiles are of the same make, or that all machinery from an assembly line is uniform — we at once assume that they were designed by man and therefore reflect the underlying mind of man. Should we not make a similar assumption with respect to the fundamental entities of atomic and nuclear physics .... though the intelligence behind them is not that of man. For Margenau it is the Universal Mind of which every conscious being and every entity composing the world is a part.
2. For Margenau, the fact that we perceive the same world is evidence for the existence of the Universal Mind. Granted, everyone's vision of things is not precisely identical, a fact amply documented by decades of experiments in perceptual psychology. Yet there is a rough equivalence between our visions that no one can doubt; we can communicate shared experiences about our world without too much difficulty. This fact is profoundly important. If, as modern neuroscience agrees, we know nothing except through the senses, then why is there not a different world for each brain? Brains are *not* alike even in identical twins. And the same brain, from one moment to the next, can perceive the same stimuli in a different way, and make a different world picture. When we consider how radically different the pictures that our brains make *could be*, it is astonishing that our world pictures turn out to be as coherent as they are. And the reason they *are* coherent, Margenau asserts, is *not* because our brains are similar or work the same, *but*



*because our minds are one.* It takes a single consciousness to make a single picture of the world, especially when the world picture is being assembled by some six billion brains on this planet. Only the One Mind, a Universal Mind, could do such a thing. To perform in such a way it must be non-local in the sense of being beyond individual brains and bodies. If the One Mind were not at work shaping the vast amount of sensory data processed every moment by the sea of brains on Earth, we might expect world pictures to be formed that are so disparate as to be incommunicable.

Some may counter here that the pictures we make of the world are one because there is only one world to make the pictures *from*. This view is that of naive realism, and Margenau and modern physics in general ask us to go beyond it, for there is really no “out there” that we can regard as totally external, objective, and the same for every one. There is an aspect of reality that is deeper than the “outside” objects, and must include the mind. Ultimately this is the reality of the One, the Universal Mind, which in its most comprehensive expression is God.

3. In modern science, scientists have concepts for many nonmaterial entities, many of which are called fields. In quantum mechanics the so-called irrational idea — non-material impacting the material — has indeed come to pass and are commonplace. Margenau states that interaction between the immaterial and the material are known to occur, indeed abound in modern physics. Every electric motor depends on it. Elusive entities such as probability fields, a purely mathematical construct ... affects the behaviour of atomic entities.

Similar ideas have been expressed by David Bohm, a former professor of theoretical physics in the University of London and a long time associate of Einstein. These and many other scientists greatly support and validate the authentic religious belief of the spiritual nature of reality in general and of human self in

particular perennially held by humanity around the world. And as I have already said above, a spiritual and non-local view of human agent makes the entire world with its myriad inorganic and living beings a place of interaction and connection, not of isolation and disjunction. Indeed one feels a deep unity and connectedness with all under the overarching unity of God and is saved from both psychologically morbid alienation and loneliness and many epistemic quandaries and solipsism. This also explains why in the last century the American philosopher Hunter Mead in his widely acclaimed *Types and Problems of Philosophy* quite significantly subtitled the chapter on Idealism as "The World is Friendly".

### END NOTES

- 1 Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) is widely recognized as one of the most distinguished philosopher of our times. In the course of his career he has written extensively on a broad range of philosophical issues. For a very long time he was John Nuveen Professor of Philosophical Theology at the University of Chicago in USA.
- 2 The published version of Paul Ricoeur's Gifford Lectures, namely *Oneself as Another* (1990, English tr.) was published by Edinburgh University Press.
- 3 Edited and annotated by Prof. M. Saeed Sheikh, several editions of Allama Muhammad Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* have been published both by Iqbal Academy (Lahore) and the Institute of Islamic Culture.
- 4 H. D. Lewis, C. A. Campell, Jerome Schaffer and Richard Swinburne, among others, are some of the western philosophers who support the Cartesian non-local view of mind and self.
- 5 Ahmad, A. (1986), *Concept of Self and Self-Identity*. Lahore: Iqbal Academy.
- 6 Henry Margenau was Professor of Physics at Yale University from 1926 to 1969. *Miracle of Existema* was published by New Science Library, Shambab Book, UK (1987). He actively participated in scientific/metaphysical speculations till his death in 1997.
- 7 Berman, Morris (1981), *The Re-enchantment of the World*. USA: Cornell University Press.