

## **IQBAL'S PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY OF FREEDOM**

**Hafiz Muhammad Hammad Mushtaq**

Lecturer in Philosophy,  
 Government Dyal Singh College,  
 Lahore, Pakistan  
 Email: [be\\_hammad@yahoo.com](mailto:be_hammad@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** This study is an attempt to bring into light the novelty and the contemporary relevance of Iqbal's Philosophical Theology of Freedom. It has been argued that the approach with which Iqbal postulates human freedom – alongside its extent – is not only original but is also more maintainable owing to its systemic coherence and explanatory power. The endeavor has been carried out by showing the necessary link and dependence of human freedom with such variables as temporality, God's attributes, and causation. Adherence to the concept of openness of future, limitlessness of human knowledge and creativity, rationalization of various attributes of God, and the unveiling of the nature of teleology and causation allows Iqbal to formulate an account of human freedom that is workable amidst the postulation of legal, ethical, and religious responsibility. This study has been carried out by analyzing Iqbal's major philosophical work *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Contextualizing of his approach amidst larger philosophically relevant canvas has also been attempted.

**Key Words:** Iqbal, God, Freedom, Temporality, Teleology, Causation, Man.

**Introduction:**

Iqbal enjoys the status of being the most esteemed philosopher of Pakistan. Among his celebrated works, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is the most phenomenal philosophical account based on a series of lectures. This work sums up his philosophical views ranging from *Philosophy of Religion* to *Philosophy of Art and Science*. In this work, he critically evaluates a variety of thinkers and scientists from the Islamic as well as the Western world, and provides a synthesis based on his own insights. *Reconstruction* is an evidence of the intellectual awareness of Iqbal not only of classical but also of the contemporary thinkers. The greatness of his thought lies in that he made a genuine effort to re-construct *Islamic Theology*, which was considered to be a settled affair – not in need of any consideration let alone revision – by the clergy. Based upon his deep insight into the contemporary scientific and philosophic knowledge, he expounded that the *theology* based on *Greek* knowledge forms is outdated and flawed, inconsistent and insufficient for the modern mind. Iqbal's thought – especially in *Reconstruction* – is radically anti-tradition.

The relation between God, man and universe is one of the most important areas of theological exploration. The nature of *becoming* and the extent of human freedom are closely related to this. The notion of human freedom has a direct influence upon the religious eschatological doctrines, socio-ethical responsibility, and justice. Any effort to curtail human freedom has a negative bearing upon the validity and justification of the above cited concepts. Having a sense of it, theologians have traditionally tried to come up with a solution to the dilemma. However, they appear to have fallen short owing to their commitment to the concepts like metaphysical determinism, fatalism, God's foreknowledge, as well as a flawed conception of teleology. All this results in a devotion to determinism and fatalism and “behind the acceptance of astral determinism there lay, among other things, the fear

of freedom – the unconscious flight from the heavy burden of individual choice which an open society lays upon its members.”<sup>1</sup>

The situation is further aggravated by a faulty institutionalization of the concept of causation by the modern science – especially physics. All these deterministic approaches eventually end up diminishing the extent of human freedom. In the pages to come, an effort is made to counter these fatalistic and deterministic tendencies to favor human freedom and balance it out amidst the power, knowledge and design of God. Process philosophy of Iqbal as has been expounded in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is being used as a theoretical framework. The task has been accomplished in three sections. In the first part, the problem of temporality and metaphysical determinism has been discussed in relation to human freedom. Secondly, the relation of God’s foreknowledge and teleology is established with fatalism. Lastly, it is seen how causal determinism is contradictory to human freedom. Common amongst all the sections is an effort to make a strong case for human freedom using the process thought of Iqbal.

### **1. Temporality and Metaphysical Determinism**

The concept of human freedom and free will is essentially related to temporal ontology. Parmenides starting from the premise ‘*It is*’ concludes the *motionlessness* of *existents*. On the basis of the assertion of the self-identity of *existing*, he logically disproves *change* – which necessarily leads him to the *block universe view*.<sup>2</sup> The metaphysical determinism declares that “The objective world simply is, it does not happen. Only to the gaze of my consciousness...does a section of this world come to life as a fleeting image in space which continuously changes in time.”<sup>3</sup>

Considering *time* to be *symmetric* – thereby embracing the *block universe view* – necessarily renders all activity meaningless. The essential link between the Parmenides’ block universe view and

<sup>1</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The World of Parmenides*, ed. by Arne F. Petersen (London: Routledge, 1998), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Popper, *The World of Parmenides*, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Hermann Weyl, *Philosophy of Mathematics and Natural Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 116.

metaphysical determinism is narrated by Popper in the following manner.<sup>4</sup>

...the block universe interpretation, and any similar interpretation, commit us to metaphysical determinism. By this I mean a determinism like the one that assumes an omniscient deity (with or without the deity) knowing all future events, so that what happens in the future is fixed, whether by natural laws or by chance....

Theories of Physics – that deal with the nature of time – are also interpreted by thinkers in various ways. For example, thinkers like Godel (1949), Grunbaum (1974), and Reichenbach (1973) interpret the theory of relativity to stand for the block universe view. On the other hand, thinkers like Meyerson (1985), Bergson (1965), and Whitehead (1961) believe that the theory of relativity proves the case for *objective becoming*. Contrarily, on the basis of Quantum Gravity, Monton (2006) favors *presentism*, and Bigaj (2008), on the basis of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics, advocates the dynamic conception of becoming. Likewise, de Saint-Ours (2008) proposes '*a metaphysics of dynamical relationalism for a future theory of quantum gravity*'.<sup>5</sup>

Central to the project of *Reconstruction* is the concept of human freedom. Being a *process* philosopher, creativity and temporality are fundamental to Iqbal's thought. Resultantly, change, motion, and continuity are the central pillars of his philosophy, which he employs to theorize about God, Man, and Universe. Change and motion are a symbol of life – not only for an individual but also for societies and nations – and the lack thereof leads to stagnation, decay, and death. Importantly, change and motion for Iqbal (like other *process* philosophers e.g. Bergson, Whitehead, etc.) is not *subjective*. Iqbal favors *objective* change with the real possibility (and not the illusion) of *becoming*. The universe, according to Iqbal, "... is not a block universe,

<sup>4</sup> Popper, 174-175.

<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Saint-Ours, "Time and Relation in Relativity and Quantum Gravity: From Time to Processes." In *The Ontology of Spacetime II*, ed. by Dennis Dieks (Boston: Elsevier, 2008), 255.

a finished product, immobile and incapable of change. Deep in its inner being lies, perhaps, the dream of a new birth".<sup>6</sup>

Essential to this view of *becoming* is his commitment to *the open future* hypothesis.<sup>7</sup> Temporal ontology based upon Open Future hypothesis helps Iqbal in avoiding fatalism and determinism (of all sorts) and ensuring human freedom. Adherence to the block universe view – and hence metaphysical determinism – is counterproductive. It renders the essence of being human – that for Iqbal is creativity – meaningless. Iqbal categorically rejects metaphysical determinism by announcing that real possibilities are available to humans regarding all their actions<sup>8</sup> as opposed to the fixation of the future course of events by Deity – which is the popular and officiated doctrine in the religious arenas. Whatever is not yet realized remains undetermined – in all respects – unless it actually happens and passes through objective becoming. Instead of being a reality, therefore, "*future exists only as an open possibility*".<sup>9</sup> To account for human freedom and make the concept of responsibility, novelty and creativity meaningful, it is essential to go with the open future hypotheses which favor activity – and hence, change and motion in the *objective* sense. Metaphysical determinism does not leave any room for objective *becoming* as;

If history is regarded merely as a gradually revealed photo of a predetermined order of events, then there is no room in it for novelty and initiation. Consequently, we can attach no meaning to the word "creation", which has a meaning for us only in view of our own capacity for original action.<sup>10</sup>

Iqbal's rejection of metaphysical determinism through open future hypotheses allows him to adhere to the asymmetry of time. In this view, ontologically speaking the past, present, and the future are

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 2017), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 80.

<sup>9</sup> Iqbal, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Iqbal, 63.

different. Past – alongside its existents – is fixed, defined and determined. Everything related to the past is not changeable. Present, on the other hand, is in the process of becoming and involves constant activity and decisions of agents. Present was by no means present beforehand. Finally, future and its existents are non-existents at the present. Future ‘*is not*’ and is in the making. Rather it will be. Future is not an unfolding of something already existent. This view apart from making room for human freedom goes well with an expanding universe. Likewise, it gives more meaning to life by giving ontological importance to human actions, decisions, and becoming – thereby making the concept of legal, ethical, and social responsibility appear workable, worthwhile, and non-contradictory. The concept of responsibility amounts to the declaration that neither mechanistic nor any religious agency can deprive humans of the freedom which makes emergentism – ontologically speaking – not only possible but necessary. Hence, the future is unforeseeable and novel.

## **2. Episteme, Teleology and Fatalism:**

Theories that deny free will embrace the view (explicitly or implicitly) that ‘*whatever will be, will be*’ irrespective of human efforts. *Fatalism*, therefore, was known as ‘*the idle argument*’ in the ancient Greece, according to Cicero’s *De Fato*. Acceptance of God’s foreknowledge essentially leads to *fatalism*. David Kyle Johnson (2009) denies the access of future events to God by showing that it leads to Fatalism by using following argument;

God’s knowledge is necessary.

Whatever is necessary happens necessarily.

Therefore, God’s knowledge necessitates events and leads to fatalism.

The above argument is based on the Platonic conception of knowledge as justified true belief. Belief in the foreknowledge leads to the validation of *fatalism*. Being an instant of Parmenides’ *block universe*, *fatalism* puts an end to human freedom. The doctrine of *fate* implies that nothing *becomes*. All events are pre-destined by Deity and are being played on the stage of the universe. Humans, according to this

view, have no control over anything as they are condemned to be whatever they *are*. This sort of view, however, raises questions of serious concern related to *responsibility* – ethical, legal, and social – and *justice*. Iqbal realizes these issues that orthodox theology faces to date due to this doctrine of fatalism. As opposed to the fundamentalists, he absolutely rejects this interpretation of fate. Instead, he believes that fate signifies the *state-space* of a thing.<sup>11</sup> By denouncing the possibility of the existence of full-fledge events in the favor of real possibility, novelty, and becoming, he gets rid of the trap of *fatalism*.

Johnson's argument makes it clear that it is impossible to maintain the open future hypothesis – and hence human freedom – alongside God's foreknowledge. Either we have to sacrifice the openness of future by embracing foreknowledge of God in favor of the block universe view or the other way round. Iqbal imposes no limits on human knowledge and potential for creativity. This view is cardinal to his understanding of the relationship between *Man* and *God* – and in turn helps in maintaining the postulate of human freedom. In traditional accounts, God acts as an ultimate limit to both human knowledge and creativity (with reference to which human efforts are considered futile and illusory). Greeks believed that God is an existent that is not only beyond time and space but is unchangeable – Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Plato's *Republic* especially elucidate this concept in detail. It was further speculated that God is Infinite, Omnipotent, Omniscient, and immune to any external influences. Problems related to the nature of the knowledge of God and God's relation to man and universe resulted from this conception of God. On the other hand, it reduced human beings to mere robots whose ultimate function is to exercise divine designs only. Therefore, in Iqbal's thought, belief in the Omniscience and Omnipotence of God – in the Greek absolutist sense – is contradictory to the postulate of human freedom.<sup>12</sup> To ensure human freedom, consequently, Iqbal gives a novel account of God – which has no parallel in Muslim thought.

Iqbal believes that neither the knowledge of God (fatalism) nor science (determinism) can hinder the freedom of man. On this, he rejects both Einstein and Laplace. Iqbal believes that God does not know the future.<sup>13</sup> Future is open and no one can know it before it becomes the

<sup>11</sup> Iqbal, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Iqbal, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Iqbal, 80.

present. Following the principle of Hartshorne “*To think is to relate*”<sup>14</sup> it can be implied that God’s knowledge also evolves as God is alive and all the knowledge is related to the creative and changing creatures. Iqbal expresses it in the following words.<sup>15</sup>

Divine knowledge must be conceived as a living creative activity...By conceiving God’s knowledge as a kind of reflecting mirror, we no doubt save His fore-knowledge of future events; but it is obvious that we do so at the expense of His freedom. The future certainly pre-exists in the organic whole of God’s creative life, but it pre-exists as an open possibility, not as a fixed order of events with definite outlines.

Likewise, Iqbal rejects the Eleatic block universe view, which considers all reality as *being*, hence, leaving no space for *becoming* and freedom. Being fashioned on the image of God, man is endowed with the free will and creativity. This free will and creativity of man is manifest in the world and the whole history of human evolution is a testimony to this. Far from being of a defined nature, man, according to Iqbal, unlike animals define his own nature. All human emotions are personal and relate to the private ego alone. Deity can neither ‘feel, judge, and choose’<sup>16</sup> for any human being nor it should. Humans decide for themselves on the basis of their priorities and they are justified in doing that owing to the responsibility of their actions. Only because human beings are free, they are considered responsible on moral and legal grounds.

Another related problem is the notion of teleology. The conventional understanding of the term declares teleology to be a foreseen and determined purpose. The whole universe is supposed to move towards this pre-fixed purpose. According to this view, the ultimate place of the things is predetermined and no matter what everything is supposed to reach that final resting place. The problem with this view, however, is that it renders all activity meaningless.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Iqbal, 80.

Furthermore, it leaves absolutely no space for freedom – both human and divine. For originality and creativity to have any meaning, Iqbal believes, we need to counter this view of teleology.<sup>17</sup> Ends mark the boundaries and not the placement of things and events with respect to time. Purpose directs instead of defining. Moreover, according to Iqbal, this view of teleology is not maintainable in a universe which is expanding. The expansion of the universe implies that it is yet in the process of becoming. The traditional concept of teleology, however, is suited to a universe which is a finished product. He, thereby, rejects the traditional view of teleology owing to its deterministic commitments as well as its unsuitability in the universe we know of on the basis of contemporary science.

### 3. Causal Determinism

Causality is an important *ontological* category. Different modes and hierarchy of *beings* is essentially related to it. Apart from this, the whole development of modern scientific project is indebted to it. Trust on *the uniformity of nature* gives strength to the claims of the validity of the causal link universally. However, it also paves the way for determinism of the sort advocated by Laplace. He proceeded by wedding Parmenidean view of the world with the Newtonian dynamics, thereby, ending with a fully deterministic and predictable world.<sup>18</sup> His view can be taken as the representative of the standard view about the nature of universe in the contemporary intellectual world.

Causal determinism originates from the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* – “*a real thing can never come out of nothing*”.<sup>19</sup> Necessity of the causal chain, for the existence of the real things, that has been advocated by this principle hints towards the *eternity of the world*. However, the views – *ex nihilo nihil fit* and the *eternity of the world* – has always been severely criticized and categorically rejected by theologians and religious traditions. Furthermore, this also does not go along with the

17 Iqbal, 44.

18 Popper, *The World of Parmenides*, 177.

19 Popper, 164.

*Newtonian physics* – which rejects the eternity of the world. Pemberton expresses this rejection in the following words.<sup>20</sup>

I think it is not improper to mention a reflection made by our excellent author upon these small inequalities in the planets' motions; which contains under it a very strong philosophical argument against the eternity of the world.... And a more convincing proof cannot be desired against the present constitution's having existed from eternity than this that a certain period of years will bring it to an end.

In addition, Charles Hartshorne (1996) brings into light the inadequacies of determinism by using Darwinian evolution, law of entropy, and quantum theory as instances that favor indeterminism and chance – and, hence, human freedom. He gives insights into the discrepancies of the scientific view of causality that is the major source of determinism in modern times and favors indeterminism instead. Likewise, in '*Mind, Matter, and Freedom*' with the help of *Process Metaphysics* he tries to bridge the traditional gap between mind and matter, thereby, making space for freedom (by declaring an event rather than matter or mind a substance). Likewise, John B. Cobb tries to defend the human freedom through Whitehead's metaphysics.

Quite unlike the fundamentalists and orthodox scholars, Iqbal endorses scientific outlook. He considers sense perception – which is the foundation of all empirical and natural sciences – as an important source of human knowledge. Unlike Plato – as well as *Platonic theology* – he considers the evidence of the senses as reliable and declares it to be a source of genuine knowledge.<sup>21</sup> He essentially links all kinds of knowledge – including religious – with the concrete experience.<sup>22</sup> Knowledge, according to Iqbal, '*is sense perception elaborated by understanding*'.<sup>23</sup> However, the important declaration that he makes amidst such reliance on the world of senses and matter is that matter is just one level of ontological reality – far from being the sole ontological

20 Popper,176-177.

21 Iqbal,*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 3.

22 Iqbal,4,7.

23 Iqbal,10.

reality.<sup>24</sup>This implies that man by no means is mere matter. It is for this reason that Iqbal questions the suitability of the *natural sciences* – that deal with the reality only at the level of matter and leave aside other ontological levels of reality – for the description of the whole of reality in the following words.<sup>25</sup>

Natural science deals with matter, with life, and with mind; but the moment you ask the question how matter, life, and mind are mutually related, you begin to see the sectional character of the various sciences that deal with them and the inability of these sciences, taken singly, to furnish a complete answer to your question.... Natural science is by nature sectional; it cannot, if it is true to its own nature set up its theory as a complete view of Reality.

This leads to the inference that *natural sciences* and *mechanistic* framework are by no means adequate to give an analysis of *life*. This further implies that causation – that is at the heart of mechanistic agenda – cannot be applied to yield any complete understanding of human life. The creative tendency that is the characteristic of being human alongside the postulate of openness of future – and hence the possibility of the *real* possibility as opposed to epistemic – further strengthens this hypothesis. In contradistinction to *mechanistic project* and *causality*, *creativity* and *novelty* are the defining features of *existence*. *To exist (be) is to create* and not to repeat – which is the essence of mechanism and causality. *Being* necessitates *creativity*, *novelty*, and *freedom* because

To exist in real time is not to be bound by the fetters of serial time, but to create it from moment to moment and to be absolutely free and original creation. In fact, all creative activity is free activity. Creation is opposed to repetition which is a characteristic of mechanical action.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Iqbal,26.

<sup>25</sup> Iqbal,34.

<sup>26</sup> Iqbal,40.

The argument Iqbal gives to reject *causal determinism* – in favor of human freedom – and prove the inadequacy of *causality* to account for the *reality* and *life* can be summed up as under.<sup>27</sup>

Life (Reality) is characterized by spontaneity and indetermination.  
 Causality necessitates determinism.  
 Therefore, causality cannot comprehend life (and reality).

### **Conclusion:**

The concept of human freedom plays a vital role for the maintainability of a host of ethical, legal and eschatological concepts. Furthermore, the concepts like responsibility, emergence, novelty, and becoming does not make any sense in the absence of human freedom. Moreover, it is not possible to make a case for human freedom in the absence of the real possibility. Real possibility about the future events necessarily makes room for the freedom of choice – in the absence of which the concepts listed above are not tenable. During the course of this essay, effort has been made to make a case for human freedom. It is concluded that the traditional approach which was inspired by Parmenides is not only flawed but also leads to a multiplicity of contradictions. The static block universe of Parmenides appears to be in conflict with the true nature of reality as has been advocated in the preceding pages. On the basis of logical and contemporary scientific evidence it has been suggested that the world of *being* is not the reasonable way to do philosophy.

In response to this traditional philosophical and theological method of approaching reality, Iqbal's philosophical theology of freedom is presented as a better and plausible alternative as has been laid out in his *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. With the centrality of the concept of human freedom it has been concluded that his view regarding temporality, epistemology and scientific method are a way out of metaphysical determinism, fatalism, as well as the causal determinism. Systematic coherence and an adherence to process philosophy – which paves the way to get rid of dilemmas associated with the concept of *substance* – allow him to adhere to the *open future* hypothesis. It further supplies him with the space to counter *fatalism* by

27 Iqbal,40-41.

denying foreknowledge to God. Lastly, his ideas about *causation* which are in line with general scientific method which allows for novelty is an antidote to causal determinism. The study is concluded by saying that neither metaphysical determinism, nor fatalism and causal determinism – in any form – can in any way be maintained in the presence of human freedom. Therefore, a way out – which Iqbal takes – is to take sides with the openness of future, presence of real possibility in contrast to epistemic possibility, and limiting the role of causation as per the general scientific method.

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