

Time: A Comparative Study of Creative Evolution and Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam**Sobia Tahir**

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies

Government College University Lahore

Email: dr.sobiatahir@gcu.edu.pk

Abstract: *Iqbal's study of Western Philosophy is deep, keen and thorough. He has derived profound motivation and stimulation from a number of German philosophers. However, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) has been expressly selected for the present comparison because Iqbal and Bergson shared the fundamental framework of thought extensively; they had a remarkably similar outlook regarding some most essential and deep-rooted problems of philosophy. For instance, both of them:*

- i- Strove to avoid mechanistic interpretation of the life and the universe;*
- ii- Wished to overcome the categories of (a) - Time, (b) - Space, (c) - Causality;*
- iii- Wanted to make room for (a) - Intuition, (b) - Evolution, (c) - Individuality;*
- iv- Aspired to undo Kantian philosophy specially the Critique of Pure Reason.*

The underlying motive of these desires is to ensure human freedom and existence of a rational and benevolent God. However, all these topics may not be covered in a single article, therefore, the proposed comparison has been kept confined only to "Time". Creative Evolution of Bergson has been specially chosen for the purpose, of which the comparison has been made with Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam by Iqbal. It is pertinent to mention that this is his concept of Time, from which Iqbal has inferred Self, Appreciative Self and the Ultimate Self. It is a non-serial time alone in which Self may enjoy freedom and express creativity. It is the first step towards non-mechanistic interpretation of life.

Key Words: Time, Space, Intellect, Intuition, Self, Freedom and Individuality.

Background and Introduction

A thorough review of the *Reconstruction* leaves the immediate impression on the reader that the author is profoundly preoccupied with the problem of time, which is not merely a philosophical, intellectual or academic problem for him rather an existential issue. Iqbal's grip on the various theories of time is remarkable and the wide range of his analysis is amazing and incredible. From Iraqi to Einstein, from Zeno to George Cantor, from Mir Damad to Whitehead and from Mulla Dawwani to Ouspensky, he has missed none (these are not exhaustive examples, only a random choice from Iqbal's long list). He has divided time into the serial time, real time, time without succession, eternal now, human time, divine time, time of the gross bodies, atomic time, and time during the mystical experience and so forth. So every researcher is morally obliged to give a full-fledged coverage to Iqbal's concept of time.

Iqbal has paid well-deserved attention to space as well, but his major focus of attention like Bergson is time. He has narrated the reason of the same in the most beautiful words:

“The problem of time has always drawn the attention of Muslim thinkers and mystics. This seems to be due partly to the fact that, according to Qur'an, the alternation of day and night is one of the greatest signs of God, and partly to the Prophet's identification of God with *Dahr* (time) in a well known tradition”¹.

The concept of Time or *Dahr* bears exceptional importance in Muslim Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism. According to al-Arabi, it is one of the *Asma-ul-Husna* (Beauteous adjectives of

¹ The Prophet (Peace and blessings of Allah Be upon him) said, “Do not vilify time, for time is God”.

Allah). The Ash'arites were the first thinkers who contemplated and speculated on the philosophical nature of time.²

Bergson, in the introduction of the *Creative Evolution*, expresses the agony of his soul in the following manner:

“In fact, we do indeed feel that not one of the categories of our thought—unity, multiplicity, mechanical causality, intelligent finality, etc.—applies exactly to the things of life: who can say where individuality begins and ends...In vain we force the living into this or that one of our moulds. All the moulds crack. They are too narrow, above all too rigid, for what we try to put into them”³.

Iqbal has the same impatience with these categories and wishes to break them. In one of his Urdu verses, he complains to God in this way:

“My soul protests against Your Divine system; Since You are without boundaries while I am confined in categories”

Unhappy Iqbal with limitations finds solace in the scientific theories of Einstein and philosophical method of Henri Bergson wherein he sees sufficient hope to shatter the nexus of categories. In “Knowledge and the Religious Experience”, he writes, that human intellect wishes to get rid of its self-made prisons, that is, space, time and causality⁴.

However, to outgrow these fundamental categories, the intellect of man itself has to be reinterpreted and remoulded; it will have to re-define its own role and purpose. Since the intellect in its

² Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of the Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 2006), 58-59.

³ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, tr. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xxxv.

⁴Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 6.

present shape is unable to overcome the categories and appreciate the life and universe in their true verities including time. Bergson is of the same view that life is beyond limitations as unity, multiplicity and causality etcetera. According to him, Epistemology and life are one and the same. Though he is not a Phenomenologist in the approved sense of the word, however, the seeds of phenomenology may be traced in his philosophy. He stresses that any theory of Epistemology which solely depends on intellect may neither shed any light on knowledge, nor may appreciate life. This Epistemology is unable to break outworn shackles in which knowledge is imprisoned.⁵

To “replace” intellect, the proposed theory of knowledge will have to rely more on “intuition” which will enable it to tear away Kantian categories. The intense admiration for intuition, we will find common both in Bergson and Iqbal. However, before moving further, it would be fine to have a look at “intuition” itself; what do Bergson and Iqbal mean by it? According to Bergson *intuition* directs us into the inward depth of life.

Intuition is a disinterested and self-conscious instinct which may, not only contemplate on its object, but may also expand it. Intuition exposes to the intellect its limitations and tries to teach it that life may not be bound in categories alone. Moreover, life may not be understood or explained with the help of finality or mechanical causality only⁶.

Iqbal on the other hand uses more or less the same terminology and declares intuition as higher kind of intellect⁷. Both Bergson and Iqbal are not happy with Kant, because he could not acknowledge the proper status of intuition and considered intellect

⁵ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, xxxvii.

⁶ Bergson, 114.

⁷ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 2.

as the only source of appreciating reality. This we are going to discuss in detail, but here a sentence from Iqbal will help us in understanding his concept of intuition. Iqbal compares Ghazali and Kant; and he is surprised that a philosopher of Kant's stature could not recognize that thought and intuition were the two faces of the same coin. Iqbal stresses that thought by virtue of its inherent restriction is incapable of appreciating inclusiveness, since it operates in the realm of serial time only.⁸ He further writes in the same context:

“Both Kant and Ghazali failed to see that thought, in the very act of knowledge, passes beyond its finitude”.⁹

This debate, however, may not move further without Bergson's harsh criticism of Kant. Keith Ansell Pearson analyzes it in the Introduction of *Creative Evolution*:

Bergson has differences with Kant on two issues:

1. First, his idea of Metaphysics is radically different from that of Kant's;
2. When Bergson studies organic changes in life empirically, he does not give as much importance to space as he gives to time. For him real agent of change is time.¹⁰ (On the contrary, for Kant, time and space both bear equal significance).

His main objection to Kant is this that he perceives only “one kind of time” hence considers metaphysics impossible. Iqbal and Bergson, on the contrary believe in more than one systems of time. Bergson really seems annoyed with Kant again on the problem of

⁸ Iqbal, 4.

⁹ Iqbal, 5.

¹⁰ Keith Ansell Pearson, “Introduction to *Creative Evolution*” in *Creative Evolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), xix.

time since Kant is not ready to give an absolute position to duration. Moreover, he treats time on an equal level with space¹¹.

Now we have sufficient contextual information to start our discussion regarding the idea of time presented by two great thinkers. It is now the high time to move towards the real issue under discussion.

Discussion

Bergson, being the philosopher of life in the renowned Egyptian philosopher Hassan Hanafi's parlance puts a question to Kant in a strict tone then answers himself most emphatically:

But between physical existence, which is spread out in space, and non-temporal existence, which can only be a conceptual and logical existence like that of which metaphysical dogmatism speaks, is there no room for consciousness and life? There is, unquestionably.¹²

If so, why is Kant unable to appreciate it? Why do we ignore it? How can we apprehend it? Both Bergson and Iqbal have an answer in the form of two separate and distinct sets of time. Bergson responses:

The fallacy we commit it that we try to go to moments from duration, supposing ourselves dwelling in duration. While the correct approach is that we should move from moments to duration and collect moments to connect them again into duration.¹³

However, this 'Duration' may not be appreciated by intellect since it is unable to understand life due to its innate

¹¹ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*,132.

¹² Bergson,230.

¹³ Bergson, 231.

incompetency¹⁴. Who is then the reliable friend---- only intuition. This trustworthy source, however, is unable to be functional in the time which is appreciated by the common sense as perpetually passing and divided into past, present and future. Intuition needs a special sort of time which is called by Bergson 'Duration' as above, and at times, 'Pure Duration'. Thus we need a new concept of time associated with its necessary counterpart space; in the configuration of which, intuition may be accommodated. What does Bergson mean by this duration and how is it different from ordinary time? To which extent is it acceptable for Iqbal whose creative ego is yearning for freedom from categories? Bergson defines duration as:

“Duration does not mean, that one moment is passing and another is taking its place. Since in that case time would become an eternal present, which it is not. In that case past will be left behind as a dead entity and its actualization in future will be impossible. This situation will hinder the way of any evolution at all. Duration, in fact is that movement of time in which past moves forward as well and becomes part and parcel of the future adding to its size and volume. This is the true sense of evolution” .¹⁵

Iqbal perfectly agrees with Bergson, as he is of the opinion:

When we analyze Pure Time profoundly, we come to know that we have not left past behind somewhere in obscurity; rather past too, is moving with us in the present moment. Being a lived experience it may not die or vanish. Similarly future, too is not pre-determined or already given which we have to meet

¹⁴ Bergson, 106.

¹⁵ Bergson, 3

somewhere ahead. It exist as a possibility and a possibility which is simultaneously undetermined and open-ended.¹⁶

Here the phrase ‘Open possibility’ is worth noting, since Iqbal’s concept of freedom is directly related to it. Without taking future as an open possibility, no room exists for freedom. Let us see the relationship of this future as an open possibility with intellect, intuition and time. Can they in their current meaning sustain its load?

Intellect deals with something *thought* while the intuition is concerned with something *lived*. The thought falls within the mathematical time which may be measured with the help of a watch; whereas, the lived experience which is purely psychic in nature and may be appreciated with the help of intuition alone is beyond that time. Bergson has quoted an excellently simple and easy example to explain such a difficult idea:

“If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time we have to wait is not mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something *thought*, it is something *lived*”¹⁷.
[Italics original].

Bergson wrote *Creative Evolution* in 1907, almost a decade before the propounding of Theory of Relativity by Einstein. To some people he is the forerunner of Relativity, though he was not a

¹⁶ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 39-40.

¹⁷ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 6.

physicist, even then, his ideas bear striking resemblance with those of Einstein regarding relativity of space and time. Iqbal, however, a great admirer of Einstein is not satisfied with his concept of time, rather he is not even comfortable with Bergson's, which we are going to discuss soon. Iqbal has very thoroughly discussed the philosophical issues related to time, space and movement in the second lecture of *Reconstruction*, under the title of, "The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience". In the same lecture he has comprehensively and critically analyzed Einstein's Time, in which future is already given and is not an open possibility.

Theory of relativity by Einstein treats time as unreal and takes it as another dimension of time. It snatches from time its capability of acting as an undetermined creative activity. Time has no mobility, it is actually we, who move and greet those events which were already determined and had been waiting for us. There is no room for time as a lived human, personal and subjective experience. It cannot encompass those events which are beyond the realm of mathematics. .¹⁸

Three points are noteworthy in the above passage;

- i- Iqbal and Bergson believe in the freedom of human Ego or Will, which is not possible in any set-up of time in which future may be predicted;
- ii- They are not at home with the mathematical concept of time and prefer psychic time, which is experienced by the living subjects, that is, human beings;
- iii- Time is a free creative movement for Iqbal.

In "The Concept of God and the Meaning of Prayer", Iqbal further emphasizes on the quality of time as a mental phenomenon.

He writes that the true nature of time or duration may be known by the appreciative self alone. This appreciative self is different from our efficient self which lives in everyday time measured by the watches. How does appreciative self live and work? Iqbal replies that appreciative self is comfortable in pure duration alone, which is its natural abode. Here there is no change in the ordinary sense. There is no such thing as sequence or successiveness, hence the self keeps on moving from intellect to intuition and vice versa.¹⁹

The efficient self has to keep itself attached with the outer world and space, since it has to deal with the daily affairs of time and the external world necessarily. In this state events and moments are mutually isolated. Efficient self is more or less composed of various states, which are sometimes mutually exclusive too (This point resembles with that of Hume's- Author). The time of efficient self is, nevertheless, part of space. It may be measured as long or short and it is the same time we see on the watch.

Before the study proceeds further with pure duration, appreciative and efficient self and other allied concepts, let us have a quote from Edmund Husserl, who has more or less the similar concept of time. In the second meditation of the *Cartesian Meditations*, he defines "universal synthesis" as follows:

"The *fundamental form* of this universal synthesis, the form that makes all other syntheses of consciousness possible, is the all embracing *consciousness of internal time*"²⁰. [Italics original].

¹⁸ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 31.

¹⁹ Iqbal, 61.

²⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, tr. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 43.

Here we may see a great similarity of approach between the two great thinkers, rather among the three including Bergson. There is change and movement in real, pure or psychic time. However, change and movement may not be separated from each other and their components are non-serial in nature. Iqbal further elaborates his concept:

Time of the appreciative -self is a complete whole which the efficient -self divides into many pieces for its convenience when it interacts with the world of space, that is, the external world. However, pure time remains unaffected by the space²¹.

He himself acknowledges that mystery of time is not easy to resolve²². The renowned English philosopher of 20th century, C.D. Broad has admitted very courageously in his book, *Scientific Thought* that time is the most difficult philosophical issue to deal with.²³.

Iqbal admits that:

Reality is incomplete without the notion of time. However, serial time, which we observe from the watch may never be taken as real time. Serial time may not be understood until not divided into three periods. Change is inevitable for the serial time, while it is not the case with pure duration. Serial time too is pure duration but has been broken into moments with the help of which Reality makes it possible to perform its regular duties and manages its everyday tasks. It is in this sense that the Qur'an says: And to Him is the change of the night and of the day.²⁴

²¹ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 38-39.

²² Iqbal, 46.

²³ C.D. Broad, "Time and Change" in *Scientific Thought* ed. C.K. Ogden (London: The International Library of Philosophy, 1923), 84.

²⁴ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 46-47.

For Iqbal reality is spiritual in nature, as he repeats twice in two separate lectures of the *Reconstruction*:

“Personally, I believe that the ultimate character of Reality is spiritual²⁵”.

“Reality is, therefore, essentially spirit²⁶”.

If reality is spirit, then as a logical corollary, the associated concepts of time, space, rest and motion are also subjective and mental in nature. That is the reason that Hassan Hanafi has titled Iqbal as a “Philosopher of Subjectivity”. Iqbal is fully consistent here and has drawn similar conclusion. He writes in the context of Ash’araites’ Atomism:

“It is obvious that motion is inconceivable without time. And since time comes from psychic life, the latter is more fundamental than motion. No psychic life, no time: no time, no motion.”²⁷

For Bergson, time is already noted and drafted; as he says:

“Whenever, anything lives, there is, open somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed”.²⁸

Had it not been so, the universe must not have unfolded itself as it has done and has been doing and everything would have been provided to us like a film. This gives me the clue that future will come after the present, it is not accompanying the present currently. Otherwise it will become determined The time of

²⁵ Iqbal, 31.

²⁶ Iqbal, 57.

²⁷ Iqbal, 62.

²⁸ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 11.

the universe must be in consonance with the demands of life that exists in it.”²⁹

He reaches a very subtle conclusion regarding the difference between Classical and Modern Physics and also the need of a parallel discipline. He concludes:

*“To sum up, while modern physics is distinguished from ancient physics by the fact that it considers any moment of time whatever, it rests together on a substitution of time-length from time-invention.”*³⁰ [Italics original].

At the same time, he affirms the growth of another kind of knowledge which will specially accommodate intuition: it is more than clear that Physics is not enough for humanity to understand the universe, its own self and the consciousness. Physics may not take hold of intuition, nor may appreciate pure duration. In order to accomplish this task the mind would have to come out of its comfort zone and give up its favourite categories of understanding.³¹ This last sentence reminds us of the cherished assertion of Iqbal that human intellect is getting rid of its old icons of causation, time and space, of which once it was so fond.

If we compare the above quote of Bergson with the following verses of Qur’an explored by Iqbal; it reaffirms the idea that universe is not yet complete, rather is in the process of completion, as has been asserted by Allah Himself.

‘He (God) adds to his creation what He wills’. (*Al-Qur’an*, 35:1).

‘Everyday does some new work employ Him’. (*Al-Qur’an*, 55:29)

²⁹ Bergson, 216-217.

³⁰ Bergson, 218.

³¹ Bergson, 218.

‘Say---go through the earth and see how God has brought forth all creation; hereafter will He give it another birth.’ (*Al-Qur’an*, 29:20)

Iqbal further highlights the intertwined concepts of creation and freedom:

The atomic time is the product of creation and movement. When the self moves from appreciation to efficiency; this movement gives rise to full freedom and creative potential. All of us may experience it and move from serial time to pure duration. However, we may not fully exist in it and we have to come back to serial time. Only the Real Appreciative Self, that is the Ultimate Ego lives in Pure Duration and His time does not entail change. That is why full creative freedom is the prerogative of Ultimate Ego alone.³²

If the real time or the pure duration is succession without change and appreciative self is aware of it too, then why we cannot understand it easily? Why its apprehension is so difficult for us? One of the reasons, Iqbal describes, is the limited vocabulary and structure of ordinary language which may not express this sort of inner experience in appropriate words. It is only the courtesy of the appreciative self which does not give up and continues its corrective efforts to convert broken pieces of the serial time into a complete whole of a personality.

As far as unreality of time is concerned, Bergson denied the teleological (purpose-oriented) character of reality, since according to him; teleology also makes the time unreal. How? Bergson asserts that if future is not accessible to Reality, the Reality may not be declared either free or creative. If not free and creative then

³² Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 40.

unreal. Iqbal partly agrees with the argument, since purpose has two meanings in his opinion, a preordained or an open ended. Verily the universe is not purposeless in this sense, since its Creator has not made it merely as a sport:

“We have not created the Heavens and the Earth and whatever is in between them as a sport. We have created them but for a serious end: but the greater part of them understands it not.” (*Al-Qur’an*, 44: 38-39).

“Verily in the creation of the Heavens and in the Earth, and in the succession of the night and of the day, are signs for men of understanding, who standing and sitting and reclining, bear God in mind and reflect on the creation of the Heavens and the Earth, and say, ‘Oh, our Lord! Thou hast not created this in vain’. (*Al-Qur’an*, 3:190-91).

Hence, universe with all its details and particulars is serving an open-ended purpose, a purpose which has not been pre-written in the annals of destiny or fate. Iqbal himself says in this regard:

“To my mind nothing is more alien to the Qur’anic outlook than the idea that the universe is a temporal working out of a pre-conceived plan. As I have already pointed out, the universe, according to the Qur’an, is liable to increase. It is a growing universe and not an already completed product which left the hand of its maker ages ago, and which is now lying stretched in space as dead mass of matter to which time does nothing, and consequently is nothing.”³³

Here, Iqbal has refuted every sort of predetermination in free working of the Creator. Simultaneously through critique of

³³ Iqbal, 44.

Bergson, Iqbal has reached his notion of the Ultimate Reality and the Self; the same Self (*Khudi*) which is the pivotal point of his philosophy and poetry. It is an interesting and absorbing reading to see how Iqbal has derived that Self as well as the Ultimate Self from his own concept of time. He argues, (here we will have to quote a rather long passage from Iqbal, since its gist can be explained in his own original words only):

“A critical interpretation of the sequence of time as revealed in our selves has led us to a notion of the Ultimate Reality as pure duration in which life, thought and purpose interpenetrate to form an organic unity. We cannot conceive that unity except as the unity of a self-an all embracing concrete self-the ultimate source of all individual life and thought. I venture to think that the error of Bergson consists in regarding pure time as prior to self to which alone pure duration is predicable. Neither pure space nor pure time can hold the multiplicity of objects and events. It is the appreciative act of an enduring self only which can seize the multiplicity of duration---broken up into an infinity of instants and transform it in organic wholeness of a synthesis. To exist in pure duration is to be a self and to be able to say I am. Only that truly exists which can say, I am. It is the degree of the intuition of I am-ness that determines the degree of a thing in the scale of being”.³⁴

It clearly shows that Divine purpose, creation and freedom necessitate a separate time, which is different from serial or mathematical time.

³⁴ Iqbal, 44-45.

Conclusion

Iqbal very skillfully interpreted many phenomena with the help of multiplicity and different types of time. The importance of time may be appreciated from the fact that Allah Himself has described the change of time as one of His signs. However, if the time is taken as one and absolute, it will hinder our way to understand so many features of our own self as well as of Divine Being. Iqbal has made a great contribution to the solution of age old and enigmatic problems of Muslim Theology, that is, as creation of Quran. This too, according to him is an outcome of mingling human concept of time with Divine time. Unless we do not liberate ourselves from singular mathematical time we cannot dream of freedom, which is a prerequisite of every sort of creativity. Bergson shares the same idea with him though with slight variation. The topic demands a more comprehensive study of nature of intuition; but this will be covered under another study of *Creative Evolution and Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. The present paper is short of space to cover it.

Bibliography

Bergson, Henry. *Creative Evolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Broad, C.D. "Time and Change". In *Scientific Thought* ed. C.K. Ogden, 84 .London: The International Library of Philosophy ,1923.

Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditation*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960.

Iqbal, Muhammad. *Reconstruction of the Religious Thought in Islam*. Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 2006.

Spengler Oswald. *Decline of the West*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.