

Acta Via Serica

VOLUME 2, NO. 2, DECEMBER 2017

CenSCA

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MUHAMMAD IQBAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

By İBRAHİM ÖZDEMİR*

Today, we face many problems at the planetary, national, local, and personal level. What is interesting and important is the fact that the environmental crisis that we have been facing since the 1960s is seen by many environmentalists as a crisis of Western civilization, a slow collective suicide, and “the defining challenge of our age.” This fact has encouraged many environmentalists, thinkers, and activists to turn to the wisdom of the East for a better and deeper understanding of nature and humanity for a sustainable future. Moreover, environmental, social, and economic threats are aimed at everyone without discrimination, be they Christian, Jew, Muslim, or Buddhist. Therefore, the very nature of the environmental crisis and challenge requires a cooperative, global response. In this context, this study suggests that Eastern societies may re-discover the richness of their own traditions in the light of pressing environmental problems and offer new insights to respond to these problems.

This paper will explore the possibility and relevance of Sir Muhammad Iqbal’s (1877-1938) ideas for an attitude of reverence and care for nature. It will suggest that his ideas could enlarge and enrich our perspective of ourselves vis à vis nature,

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and raise our “ecological consciousness” and moral responsibility to take action for the environment. It will be argued that Iqbal, as a great and towering son of the Silk Road and a bridge between East and West, is still relevant for us.

Key Words: Muhammad Iqbal, ethics, environmental ethics, Islam, Silk Road, Islamic Philosophy, Pakistan.

“I have no need of the ear of To-day,
I am the voice of the poet of To-morrow”
Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*

INTRODUCTION

Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) is a well-known and distinguished poet and philosopher of Pakistan and holds a unique distinction for Muslims over the globe and to general readers in the English-speaking world. Here, we use both “poet and philosopher” in the broadest sense to include his ideas relating to God, man, and the universe. This paper, however, goes on to present a critical analysis of some key concepts of Iqbal’s thought in the hope of finding some metaphysical basis for the possibility of environmental ethics. I think such a hope is by no means entirely misplaced but in fact promising. Iqbal, writing in the first quarter of the 20th century, perhaps more than any other modern Muslim thinker and scholar, is concerned with the integration of metaphysics and ethics, with the metaphysical bases of ethical positions. A cursory reading of his works from “The Development of Metaphysics in Persia,” Iqbal’s doctoral thesis submitted in 1907, to his magnum opus and by now classic book *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1934) will suffice to provide sufficient arguments in support of this claim.

In fact, Iqbal’s thinking and poetical works have been the subject of many studies in the East and West. This study, however, will try to present him not only as a great son of Pakistan but also of the Silk Road, which connects people, art, and cultures from East to West and North to South. Born in colonial India, educated in the homeland India and Europe (Germany and England), and more importantly forming his ideas with a critical study of and dialogue with the great minds of Eastern wisdom

and Western philosophy, his ideas regarding God, man and nature are more than relevant. As Ahmed Gania suggests “as a fruit of his global perspective, he is not only one of the thinkers of Muslim culture, but also, he is one of the universal thinkers of humankind.”¹

One of his biographers informs us about his education and how “these early years engendered some of Iqbal’s basic and characteristic attitudes, sympathies, and, interests. His parents had given him a deeply religious and mystical orientation, which he was to retain for the rest of his life.”² The biographer tells us that “The Qur’an, which he recited regularly, was a constant source of inspiration to him; indeed, Iqbal claims that his poetry is no more than an elucidation of the Qur’anic message.” We are told that Iqbal’s father once advised him to read the Qur’an as if it were being revealed to him directly from God, for only then, he said, would Iqbal truly understand it. This remark left an indelible impression on Iqbal’s mind and determined his intellectual and emotional attitude towards the Qur’an.³ Therefore, it can be suggested that his perception of God, humanity, and nature was shaped and molded by the Qur’an from an early age. In fact, Iqbal himself makes it clear at the beginning of *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (hereafter, cited as *The Reconstruction*) that “the main purpose of the Quran is to awaken in man *the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe.*”⁴

Iqbal, on the other hand, could be seen as a bridge between the Muslim world and European thought, a dialogue between two systems of thought in the fields of theology, social philosophy, philosophy of law, and philosophy of sciences. It was Iqbal’s imperative duty to reconcile the Qur’anic vision with the dynamic structure of the universe and latest scientific advances, especially those of physics and biology. As Fazlur Rahman underlines his idea of Reality [God] as “dynamic and the facts of existence are acts of existence,” he also adds that “certain contemporary scientific doctrines about energy and the new theory of the expanding universe confirmed his conviction.”⁵ As a result, Iqbal, through his immense scholarship and scientific knowl-

¹ A. Gania, “Allama Iqbal’s Concept of Knowledge and Humanism.” <http://www.peacewatchkashmir.com/12articles/4allamaiqbalsconceptofknowledgeandhumanism.html>. Accessed, October 10, 2017.

² Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal, Poet, and Thinker*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Muhammed Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1934), 8.

⁵ Fazlu Rahman, “Iqbal’s Idea of The Muslim,” *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4, (Dec. 1963), 439-445. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20832711.pdf?>

edge, tried to compare and contrast the theories of Western and Muslim thinkers and scientists from different periods in order to refute certain prejudices about Islam and, by the same token, to highlight a whole, ignored part of Islamic civilization. As H. Nasser argues, “the need of the hour is to rediscover Iqbal in his true perspective and not to keep him confined to a narrow limit. In fact, Iqbal is a common heritage of all humanity and his message should be allowed to reach uninterrupted and unhindered to all the citizens of the world.”⁶

A NEW STORY

Thomas Berry, the American cultural historian and eco-theologian, argues that to develop a comprehensive and inclusive environmental ethics, we need a new story of the universe and human-beings.⁷ A keener insight into Iqbal’s poetic but more importantly philosophical achievements may provide us with a new story to raise an ethics of care and responsibility towards the natural and social environment among peoples of the East and West. Although we use the term “a new story” here as coined by Berry, Iqbal prefers to use the term “*reconstruction*” to emphasize the same spirit. In *The Reconstruction*, he underlies time and again that we need fresh and new ideas to understand, not only Islam, but nature and history, too. This is why he confronts and encounters, in a critical way, the great minds of East and West in his works.

Iqbal was aware of the fact that from the start, Islam was presenting “a new story” of the relationship between humans and nature which was fundamentally different from the prevailing Pre-Islamic Arabs’ perception of nature as well as those of Christianity and Judaism. Iqbal, however, with a critical spirit, was also aware that “the concepts of theological systems, draped in the terminology of a practically dead metaphysics” of classical Islam, would not “be of any help to those who happen to possess a different intellectual background.” Therefore, “the task before the modern Muslim,” he argues, “is immense.” Moreover, Iqbal painstakingly undertook the mission “to rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past.” To do this enormous task, “the only course open to us is to approach modern

⁶ H. Nasser, H. “Dr. Iqbal: The Poet of Humanity,” in *Dr. Iqbal: The Humanist*, ed. S.G. Abbas (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1997), 18.

⁷ Thomas Berry, “The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification, and Transmission of Values” in *Teilhard Studies*, No. 1. (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books; 1978); Thomas Berry *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude and to appreciate the teachings of Islam in the light of that knowledge, even though we may be led to differ from those who have gone before us.”⁸

More importantly, Iqbal proposes that a new story based on the teachings of the Qur’an is stronger and stimulating as “religious ambition soars higher than the ambition of philosophy.” For, “religion is not satisfied with mere conception; it seeks a more intimate knowledge of and association with the object of its pursuit.”⁹ The gist of this new story is summarized by Iqbal as “Vision without power does bring moral elevation but cannot give a lasting culture. Power without vision tends to become destructive and inhuman. Both must combine for the spiritual expansion of humanity.”¹⁰ Thus, reading Iqbal with an ecological mentality, it can be argued that from the early days of Islam, there was a spiritual, healthy, and, sustainable relationship between humans and nature. Therefore, the first impression of an environmentalist may suggest that Iqbal can be classified as a deep eco-philosopher in the sense that Arne Naess coined the term “deep ecology,” which means asking deeper questions regarding the relationship between humans and nature.¹¹ Here it is evident that Iqbal, using a Qur’anic lens, has a keener insight into the deeper meaning of the universe and humanity.¹² He constructed his thought on his understanding of the universe and the ego in a dynamic interaction of the ego with the universe and then with himself, which led him to the discovery of what he calls the Ultimate Ego¹³, that is God, Allah of the Qur’an and Islam.

Therefore, an engaged environmentalist may find in Iqbal’s system an inexhaustible metaphysical source of inspiration to develop an Islamic ethics of care for the environment. Moreover, keeping in mind Iqbal’s background and engagement with Western philosophy in a critical spirit will make his poetic and philosophical thinking

⁸ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 92.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹ George Sessions and W. Devall, *Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1985), 116.

¹² Iqbal’s preoccupation and deep insight into the meaning of nature reminds us of what Ghazali (c. 1058–1111) calls “the ocean of the Quran” and reminds readers of the Holy Scripture “How long will you ramble on the shore of the ocean, closing your eyes to the wonders of the meanings of the Qur’ān?” See A. H. al-Ghazali, *The Jewels of the Qur’an*, trans. Muhammad Abdul Qaseem (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaysia Press, 1977), 19–20.

¹³ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 56, 58; Mir, 28.

a source of inspiration for non-Muslims, too.¹⁴

UNDERSTANDING IQBAL

When trying to articulate Iqbal's perception of the relationship between humans and nature and the possibility of an ethics of environmental care and awareness from his ideas, we have to be careful of what Rahman calls a "posthumous tyranny of interpretation at the expense of a genuine understanding."¹⁵ To avoid such a misunderstanding, Rahman suggests a methodology of how to understand Iqbal in particular, and any philosopher in general. As such, it will be helpful to the purpose of this study to summarize Rahman's advice for students of Iqbal as well as the social sciences. Doing this, we can avoid some critics who rightly can question how we can talk about Iqbal's environmental ethics, for there were no environmental problems and discussions during Iqbal's era.

Rahman argues that to understand Iqbal on a certain subject we can assemble related "verses and to try to see what all these amount to."¹⁶ However, Rahman suggests that "this would be a very superficial and mechanical treatment since it would lack the necessary *synthesizing unity*." This approach can easily lead us to fall into what Rahman calls "the peril of subjectivism; i.e., of projecting onto Iqbal whatever ideology or philosophy one may have imbibed elsewhere."¹⁷ Rahman's suggestion for getting rid of this trap is to formulate his "central theme, the pivotal core doctrine that would put everything that he said in its proper perspective."¹⁸ To bring out Iqbal's perception of

¹⁴ Iqbal makes his critical approach and terminology very clear with these remarks: "I propose to look at Islam from the standpoint of *the critical student*. But I may state at the outset that I avoid the use of expressions current in popular Revelation Theology, since my method is essentially scientific and consequently necessitates the use of terms which can be interpreted in the light of everyday human experience. For instance, when I say that the religion of a people is the sum total of their life experience finding a definite expression through the medium of a great personality, I am only translating the fact of revelation into the language of science." Muhammed Iqbal, *Islam as an Ethical and a Political Ideal: Iqbal's Maiden English Lecture*, ed. S. Y. Hashimy (Lahore: *Orientalia*, 1977), 53-101. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00islmlinks/txt_iqbal_1908.html, accessed October 10, 2017.

¹⁵ Rahman, 339.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, italics added.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

God, man, and nature, I will try to elucidate the major and pivotal core concepts of this thought. Then, I will look at some possible outcomes of Iqbal's thought for an ethics of care and responsibility. Finally, I will suggest that reading Iqbal's poetry and philosophical works with an ecological mind will help us to discover new insights into the man-nature relationship.

ULTIMATE REALITY/GOD

Iqbal begins *The Reconstruction* with some profound questions regarding the deep relationship of God, humanity, and nature with “a provocative style”¹⁹ and asks:

What is the character and general structure of the universe in which we live? Is there a permanent element in the constitution of this universe? How are we related to it? What place do we occupy in it, and what is the kind of conduct that befits the place we occupy?²⁰

It seems that the foundation of Iqbal's thought is the concept of God or Allah of the Qur'an. However, he prefers to use a philosophical concept and uses the Khudi/Ultimate Reality or the Absolute Ego which is “the ultimate ground of all existence.”²¹ This force, which we may call Divine khudi [God], through self-assertion or self-manifestation, gives rise to the world of phenomena, and therefore establishes a spiritual as well as a moral link between humans and nature:

Visible existence is one of the imprints of khudi;
Everything you see is one of the secrets of khudi.
Khudi, when it woke itself up,
Brought forth this world of presumed existence.
Concealed in it are a hundred worlds;
By affirming itself it creates other-than-itself.²²

¹⁹ Sheila McDonough, “*Iqbal: His Metaphysical Ideas*,” *Iqbal Review*, (April 2002), 17-27 <http://www.iqbalcyberlibrary.net/pdf/IRE-APR-2002.pdf>. accessed October 6, 2017.

²⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 1.

²¹ Mir, 28.

²² *Ibid.*, 28.

What is important for us here is the relationship of *kebudi* with nature “as it is in the nature of Divine *kebudi* to reveal itself, so it is in the nature of every individual existent to express itself, since every existent has a *kebudi* of its own.”²³ Rahman suggests that:

it is with this vision that Iqbal rediscovered the real message of the Qur’an and resurrected the true nature of the personality and activity of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him!). For Iqbal’s vision of The Reality is exactly the God of the Qur’an who bestows power-in-righteousness, creativity-for-goodness and, in fact, demands imperiously from men that he receives these; else he is doomed.

During his stay and studies in the West, Iqbal began developing a positive philosophy of life under which he developed his definite attitude to this world. This involved, even if it did not presuppose, an acute perception and awareness of Reality [God] which was essentially demanded both of itself and of others. The identity of this consciousness of Reality with the Islamic concept of God is only too obvious: a demanding Reality and a commanding God is exactly the same thing.²⁴

For Iqbal, however, this is not the case and he drew a very momentous lesson from this, viz., that the character of Reality is *an outward-pushing process*. This yields *the idea of force, energy, activity*. Reality, then, is *dynamic* and the facts of existence are acts of existence. Certain contemporary scientific doctrines about energy and the new theory of the expanding universe confirmed his conviction.

If pure energy and dynamic force were the only attributes of Reality, it would be just a brute power—no more than a tremendous stream of steam issuing from an engine. But the engine of Reality, besides its power, has certain other equally fundamental *built-in attributes*. These are the attributes of *directed or purposive creativity*, which confer upon the whole process the qualities of an orderly and synthetic nature. Otherwise, we could not have a cosmos at all but a stark chaos. In fact, the more one studies Iqbal, the more one is impressed by the ultimacy of *the spiritual-moral nature of Reality*, and one cannot help concluding that both the dynamic quality and *the directive-synthetic nature of the process of Reality stem from its spiritual-moral quality*.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 28.

²⁴ Rahman, 440.

²⁵ Ibid., 441 (italics added).

This suggests the concept of *khudi* as a key for “one’s place in the hierarchy of being” and it also “depends on the degree to which one’s *khudi* is developed: the earth’s *khudi* is more powerful than the moon’s, and so the latter revolves around the former, but the earth itself revolves around the sun since the sun’s *khudi* is more powerful than the earth’s.”²⁶ To quote Mir:

God is a personality, vigorously alive and constantly willing. He is the Ultimate Ego whose infinity is intensive and not extensive. He is *continuously creative*, goes on adding to His creation and is capable of changing His mind. From God conceived as the Ultimate Ego only egos proceed. Therefore, the universe from the mechanical movement of the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in human ego is the self-revelation of “the Great I am”. It is one continuous act of God.²⁷

The creative activity of God may appear outwardly as a process of change in serial time. However, in reality, the change is a continuous act of God in durational or pure time. Here Iqbal introduces his concept of what he terms “permanence-in-change.”²⁸ As it seems the Ultimate Ego is essentially creative, however, the creativity of the Ultimate Ego is fully realized in its relationship to the human ego²⁹ and nature.

With this dynamic understanding of God, Iqbal brings man face to face with his Creator through prayer. According to him, “this relationship is nowhere more profoundly manifested than in the act of prayer because prayer alone provides the possibility of coming into close contact with the Ultimate Ego.” In this act of worship, Iqbal found the self-revelation of the “Great I am,” and the proof that God is an Ego taken from the Qur’anic verse “Call upon Me and I shall answer you” (Al-Ghafir 40:60).³⁰ Now, we can look at his concept of man as “the bearer of the Divine trust.”³¹

²⁶ Mir, 28.

²⁷ Javid Iqbal, “Religious Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal,” *Iqbal Review* (April 2002), 6. <http://www.iqbalcyberlibrary.net/pdf/IRE-APR-2002.pdf>. accessed October 5, 2017; Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 68 (italics added).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Muhammed Iqbal, “Iqbal’s Concept of God: The Birth of Theism in the Philosophy of Iqbal,” *Al-Hikmat* 19, (1999): 45.

³⁰ Ibid., 44. All translations from the Qur’an are by Iqbal.

³¹ Aurang Zeb, and Khamsa Qasim, “The Concept of Khudi (The Self) in Iqbal’s The Secrets of the Self,” *Advances in Language and Literary Studies. Australian International Academic Centre* 6, n. 3 (June 2015), 202-209.

IQBAL'S CONCEPT OF MAN

The second key concept of Iqbalian thought is “the man in whom khudi is fully developed” and called “the Perfect Man.”³² When trying to understand the nature-human relationship, how any philosopher defines and places humanity in relation to nature is important. Therefore, Iqbal’s concept of the [hu]man is not only important to understand his whole project of the Ultimate Self, but also the place of man in the hierarchy of creation. Defining and explaining nature from a Qur’anic perspective, Iqbal then asks himself a new question: “What is the nature of man whom it confronts on all sides?” and “How do we find him in this environment?” His response is short and clear: “Endowed with a most suitable mutual adjustment of faculties he discovers himself down below in the scale of life, surrounded on all sides by the forces of obstruction.”³³

Iqbal develops his concept of the human in contrast to Muslim Sufism and Western philosophy, especially his reading of Nietzsche. As far as we know, although his family was a Sufi-oriented one and he grew up in a Sufi environment, after his extensive studies and travels in Europe, he developed a completely opposite meaning of the concept. While in Sufism, one is encouraged to become lost in Khudi, Iqbal claimed a re-birth from Khudi.³⁴ Here, he departs from the Ibn Arabian concept of *Wabdat al-Wujud* and creates his own concept in the footsteps of Rumi, a Sufi sage of the 13th century. Rahman, when analyzing Iqbal’s concept of the *Mu'min*, the believer, eloquently underlines this point as follows:

... instead of completely rejecting Sufism, [Iqbal] rejected the negative forms of Sufism because of their world-denying and weakening tendencies and sought to keep and encourage the positive spiritual elements-like those represented, e.g., by Rumi and Mujaddid-i Alf-i Thani. This is also the reason for his powerful and systematic critique of the West which is a living monument of dynamism and expansion but exhibits little signs of an organic synthesis which is a function of directiveness.³⁵

³² Mir, 31 (*italics original*).

³³ Iqbal.

³⁴ For the concept of re-birth and its meaning and importance in Sufism and psychology, consult Rezah Arasteh, *Rumi the Persian: Rebirth in Creativity and Love* (Tucson, AZ: Omen Press, 1972).

³⁵ Rahman, 441.

Although what Iqbal describes as “the Perfect Man” includes “Man of Truth, Free Man, and Believer (one who is a true Muslim) or Believing Man,” this concept of “The Perfect Man is not, like Nietzsche’s Superman, a class unto himself and one who is beyond good and evil.”³⁶ Rather, as Mir suggests, “he is the distillation of all that is best in humanity, the acme of human perfection and, as such, the goal of all creation, the trophy that life strives to achieve.”³⁷ Moreover, The Perfect Man of Iqbal, “sets them a model they may aspire after; he inspires and motivates them to rise to new levels of self-development; ‘infuses life into hearts’; and becomes the true representative of God on earth – Iqbal calls him *na’ib-i Haqq*, ‘God’s Vicegerent’ on earth.”³⁸ Moreover, “The Perfect Man directs the course of history, develops life’s potentialities, and creates a society that is based on the principles of peace, equality, and justice.”³⁹ According to Iqbal, the Prophet Muhammad is the Perfect Man, whose “life-giving breath grew tulips in Arabia’s desert, creating such outstanding personalities [of Islam] as Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Ali, and Hussein. The Prophet, therefore, ought to command a Muslim’s highest loyalty, for it is only by following him that one who is imperfect can hope to become perfect.”⁴⁰

In fact, from the beginning, the Qur’an highlights, in a simple, plain but forceful and eloquent style, the individuality and uniqueness of man, and has, I think, a definite view of his destiny as a unity of life.⁴¹ Three things are perfectly clear from the Qur’an: (i) that man is the chosen of God,⁴² (ii) that man, with all his faults, is meant to be the representative of God on earth,⁴³ and (iii) that man is the trustee of a free personality that he has accepted at his peril.⁴⁴ However, for Iqbal, this dimension of the Qur’an is neglected by classical Muslims thinkers.⁴⁵ Moreover, in the light of the Qur’anic spirit (95:4-5), he argues that “man is a ‘restless’ being engrossed in his ideals to the point of forgetting everything else, capable of inflicting pain on himself in

³⁶ Mir, 31.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., (italics added).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 31-32.

⁴¹ The Qur’an, 6:94, 19:80 and 19:93-19:95.

⁴² Ibid., 20:122.

⁴³ Ibid., 2:30; 6:165.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 33:72.

⁴⁵ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 90.

his ceaseless quest after fresh scopes for self-expression.”⁴⁶ However, expounding on Verse 33:72, Iqbal declares that a human, “with all his failings, is superior to Nature, inasmuch as he carries within him a great trust, which, in the words of the Qur’an, the heavens and the earth and the mountains refused to carry.”⁴⁷

Then, Iqbal argues that “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 mold its forces to his own ends and purposes.”⁴⁸ Moreover, he explains that “in this process of progressive change God becomes a co-worker with him provided man takes the initiative.”⁴⁹ However, the Muslim must never forget the Qur’anic imperative for social change: “Verily God will not change the condition of men, till they change what is in themselves.”⁵⁰ Commenting on this verse Iqbal argues that “if he does not take the initiative and not evolve the inner richness of his being, if he ceases to feel the inward push of advancing life, then the spirit within him hardens into stone and he is reduced to the level of dead matter.”⁵¹ When commenting on Verses 2:30-2:33, which describe the creation of Adam and his relationship with angels, Iqbal states, “The point of these verses is that man is endowed with the faculty of naming things, that is to say, forming concepts of them, and forming concepts of them is capturing them.”⁵²

However, he claims “the character of man’s knowledge is conceptual, and it is with the weapon of this conceptual knowledge that man approaches the observable aspect of Reality.”⁵³ It is surprising to see that Iqbal’s wording “the weapon of this conceptual knowledge” here reminds us of the Baconian perception of nature. Again, with reference to the Qur’an, he tries to escape this understanding as the Qur’an “lays on this observable aspect of Reality.”⁵⁴ He supports his position by quoting a few verses from the Qur’an:

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The Qur’an, 13:12.

⁵¹ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 12.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.

Assuredly, in the creation of the Heavens and of the earth; and in the alternation of night and day; and in the ships which pass through the sea with what is useful to man; and in the rain which God sendeth down from Heaven, giving life to the earth after its death, and scattering over it all kinds of cattle; and in the change of the winds, and in the clouds that are made to do service between the Heavens and the earth - are signs for those who understand.⁵⁵

Although Iqbal used the term “the weapon of conceptual knowledge” after quoting these verses and seeing the universe with a Qur’anic lens, there is “no doubt” in Iqbal grasping “the immediate purpose of the Qur’an in this reflective observation of Nature.” Therefore, regarding nature as a symbol means it is not sufficient for us to look at nature using an instrumental and utilitarian mentality. Needless to say, nature is a book full of symbols and meanings that point out what is beyond itself.

If Iqbal argues “the Perfect Man represents a model that is valid for all ages,” the Prophet Muhammad’s perception and attitude towards nature and animals provides a role model for Muslim societies around the globe. It is clear that the Qur’an instructs and reminds Muslims that “Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example to follow.”⁵⁶ I have argued elsewhere that “if Muslims examine the life of the Prophet Muhammad with a ‘green’ eye, they may discover new insights for developing an environmental ethics”⁵⁷ as the Prophet himself “attached great importance, in his own practice and sayings (hadiths), not only to public worship, civil law, social etiquette, but also to planting trees, preserving forests, and conserving the environment.” Moreover, the Prophet Muhammed, “being a man of the Arabian deserts, [he] was aware of the integrity of eco-system and importance of water, greenery, and forests.”⁵⁸ On migrating to Medina, for example, “he organized the planting of trees and date groves. He made forests and green spaces conservation areas, where every sort of living creature could live unmolested.” Within these “inviolable zones,” which are called sanctuaries (*hima*), neither trees, nor shrubs, nor vegetation could be cut, nor could any wild animal be hunted or even disturbed.” Moreover, he “insisted on the protection and kind treatment of animals. He taught with his deeds and sayings that

⁵⁵ The Qur’an, op. cit., 2:164; and also see 6:97-99; 30:22.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 33:21.

⁵⁷ İbrahim Özdemir, “Muhammad,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor and Jeffrey Kaplan (New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Muslims should act kindly towards all living beings.”⁵⁹ In short, the Prophet Muhammad was very conscious of his environment and developed a spirit of love and care for the creatures of God. This is why I argue that Iqbal’s Perfect Man, the Prophet Muhammad, can be a role model for an ethics of care and responsibility.

ORGANIC, DYNAMIC, AND MEANINGFUL NATURE

The third key concept of Iqbal for our purpose here is the dynamic and organic concept of the universe and nature. The Qur’anic view of the “alternation of day and night” as a symbol of the ultimate Reality which “appears in a fresh glory every moment” underlines this dynamic structure of nature. Iqbal, when articulating the overall meaning of nature, compares and contrasts the different perceptions of nature in Western and Muslim philosophies. For example, according to “the optimist Browning, all is well with the world.” However, “to the pessimist Schopenhauer, the world is one perpetual winter wherein a blind will expresses itself in an infinite variety of living things which bemoan their emergence for a moment and then disappear forever.”⁶⁰

Iqbal, however, renders the verse “Every day doth some new work employs Him”⁶¹ to find the metaphors that could release the energy of his people, and to direct them to the healing of the wounds of the world. “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 in creation. In fact, all creative activity is free activity.”⁶² As McDonough brings to light, “one implication of this perspective is that the past can serve as a source of ideas and inspiration, but it should not be allowed to dominate the present. Creativeness requires free and spontaneous use of the cultural goods of the past for the purpose of shaping a better future. Creativeness in the present arises out of a free relationship to the source of life, which is Thou, the Ultimate Ego, alive and good.”⁶³

However, Iqbal is not satisfied with “a piecemeal view of things” and tries to see the whole picture with the spirit of Qur’anic teaching. “We cannot understand the full

⁵⁹ Özdemir.

⁶⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 77.

⁶¹ The Qur’an, 55.29.

⁶² Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 48.

⁶³ McDonough.

import of the great cosmic forces which work havoc, and at the same time sustain and amplify life.” He further argues that “the teaching of the Qur’an, which believes in the possibility of improvement in the behavior of man and his control over natural forces, is neither optimism nor pessimism. It is meliorism, which recognizes a growing universe and is animated by the hope of man’s eventual victory over evil.”⁶⁴

As such, it is not difficult to see that nature becomes not only an esthetic object for Iqbal’s poetry as we can see in the poem “*The Himalayas*,” which as Mir underlines, is one of best examples of “Iqbal’s deep and abiding interest in nature,”⁶⁵ but also a concrete book of meaning and wisdom for him. Similarly, the Qur’an has a clear and definite conception of Nature as “a cosmos of mutually related forces.” It, therefore, views “Divine omnipotence as intimately related to Divine wisdom, and finds the infinite power of God revealed, not in the arbitrary and the capricious, but in *the recurrent, the regular, and the orderly*.”⁶⁶ Iqbal insists that “the external universe is a *continual source of newness*.” It is, therefore, “impossible for human beings to have final ideas about the nature and structure of the cosmos. New information will always be forthcoming. He proclaims a strong no to any fixed ideas about the external universe.”⁶⁷

This is why Iqbal argues that the main purpose of the Qur’an “is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe.”⁶⁸ Thus, the universe and everything in it, the Qur’an claims, are signs (*ayat*) pointing to something “beyond” themselves, that is, something without which the universe, despite all its natural causes, would be nothing. Therefore, the Qur’an invites man to read the universe as signs of God.⁶⁹ These verses invite man to think over the creation which surrounds him, which he can see in his everyday life, and which is full of meaning, high design, and the goodness of God to man.⁷⁰ When looking at and contemplating nature, Iqbal strongly suggests that we will “see in the humble bee

⁶⁴ Iqbal, 50.

⁶⁵ Mir. Its opening lines speak of the agelessness of the Himalayas, comparing the mountain range favourably with Mount Sinai, according to the Qur’an, 7:142.

⁶⁶ Iqbal, 50 (italics added).

⁶⁷ McDonough. (italics added).

⁶⁸ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 8.

⁶⁹ The Qur’an, 41:53; 41:53; 51:20-21.

⁷⁰ İbrahim Özdemir, “Towards an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur’anic Perspective,” *Islam and Ecology*, ed. Richard Foltz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1-37.

a recipient of Divine inspiration”⁷¹ and constantly calls upon the reader to observe the perpetual change of the winds, the alternation of day and night, the clouds,⁷² the starry heavens,⁷³ and the planets swimming through infinite space.⁷⁴

It is surprising to see that Iqbal was aware of these deep implications of the Qur’anic message, at a time there were no talks on the human-nature relationship. Moreover, Iqbal has maintained his argumentation by an appeal to different verses of the Qur’an and reaches the ethical conclusion that the Qur’an, with its “empirical attitude engendered in its followers a feeling of reverence for the actual and ultimately made them the founders of modern science.”⁷⁵

Thus, for Iqbal, it is not difficult to see how the Qur’an engenders an ethics of reverence and care in the psyche of its reader and also made them the pioneers of modern science. Here, Iqbal’s argument regarding the createdness of nature and the birth of modern science is very important and reminds us of what A.N. Whitehead calls “the faith in the order of nature.”⁷⁶ Whitehead’s major argument in *Science and the Modern World*, that the central idea of Western civilization, faith in an order of things and in an order of nature, is also valid for the development of science in the Muslim lands, as Iqbal underlined. Here, Iqbal agrees with Whitehead’s argument and underlines that “it was a great point to awaken the empirical spirit in an age which renounced the visible as of no value in men’s search after God.”⁷⁷ In sharp contrast to the modern perception of nature as a machine, “it has no value and expresses no purposiveness.”⁷⁸ It is “... a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless: merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly,”⁷⁹ according to the Qur’an. Iqbal suggests “the universe has a serious end.” Therefore, “its shifting actualities force our being into fresh formations.” Iqbal supports his argument as follows:

The intellectual effort to overcome the obstruction offered by it, besides enriching

⁷¹ The Qur’an, 16:68-69.

⁷² Ibid., 2:164; 24:43-44; 30:48; 35:9; 45:5.

⁷³ Ibid., 15:16; 25:6; 37:6; 41:12; 50:6; 67:5; 85:1.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 21:33; 36:40; Iqbal, op. cit., 13.

⁷⁵ Iqbal, 13.

⁷⁶ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 18.

⁷⁷ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 13.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁹ Whitehead, 79-80.

and amplifying our life, sharpens our insight, and thus prepares us for a more masterful insertion into subtler aspects of human experience. It is our reflective contact with the temporal flux of things which trains us for an intellectual vision of the non-temporal. Reality lives in its own appearances; and such a being as man, who has to maintain his life in an obstructing environment, cannot afford to ignore the visible.⁸⁰

For Iqbal, there is “no doubt” that “the immediate purpose of the Quran in this *reflective observation of nature* is to awaken in man the consciousness of that of which *nature is regarded a symbol*.” However, Iqbal brings out two important implications from this Qur’anic perspective for Muslims. The first is “a feeling of reverence for the actual,” and the second, to make Muslims “the founders of modern science.”⁸¹ The Qur’an has a clear and definite conception of Nature as a cosmos of mutually related forces. It, therefore, views “Divine omnipotence as intimately related to Divine wisdom, and finds the infinite power of God revealed, not in the arbitrary and the capricious, but in the recurrent, the regular, and the orderly.”⁸²

In short, Iqbal suggests that “The Qur’an opens our eyes to the great fact of change, through the appreciation and control of which alone it is possible to build a durable civilization.”⁸³ According to the Qur’an, he argues, “the empirical attitude is an indispensable stage in the spiritual life of humanity, attaches equal importance to all the regions of human experience as yielding knowledge of the Ultimate Reality which reveals its symbols both within and without.”⁸⁴

Iqbal, then, suggests “*the organic wholeness of life*”⁸⁵ and the implications of “*the organic wholeness of life*” on the one hand and “*the perpetual endeavour*” on other hand are crucial to seeing the metaphysical implication of his thinking to develop an ethics

⁸⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 11.

⁸¹ Ibid., 13. Iqbal further underlines that “it was a great point to awaken the empirical spirit in an age which renounced the visible as of no value in men’s search after God.” In addition to “The intellectual effort to overcome the obstruction offered by it,” the Qur’an also “enriches and amplifies our life, sharpens our insight, and thus prepares us for a more masterful insertion into subtler aspects of human experience. It is our reflective contact with the temporal flux of things which trains us for an intellectual vision of the non-temporal. Reality lives in its own appearances; and such a being as man, who has to maintain his life in an obstructing environment, cannot afford to ignore the visible.”

⁸² Ibid., 76.

⁸³ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 8 (italics added).

of care for nature and non-humans. While the first one underlines his opposition to and critique of the modern and dominant perception of nature since the 17th century as a lifeless, meaningless, and mechanical entity totally indifferent and hostile to human beings, the latter tacitly underlines the sustainable character of the natural world, which requires a new pattern of human-nature relationship based on the idea of sustainability.

To understand and appreciate Iqbal's concept of nature and discover its relevance for environmental ethics, it is necessary to keep in mind the dominant modern perception of nature which still guides most of our attitudes towards nature. Although the roots of the modern world view can be taken back as far as the ancient Greek atomists, the mechanistic view of Cartesian philosophy marks the start of its dominance over the modern mind.⁸⁶ The main feature of this new worldview is a dualistic conception of reality, namely the distinction between mind and matter.⁸⁷

The mechanistic world view constructs the world as a vast machine made up of interchangeable atomic parts manipulatable from outside, just as the parts of individual machines can be replaced or repaired by human operators. However, once nature is seen as nothing but a grand machine, it is a small step to the view that only considerations of efficiency apply to our operations on nature, and that there are no moral limits imposed upon science and technology by virtue of the nature of their subject matter.⁸⁸ In short, according to the mechanical understanding, "nature is distinct from us and nature is composed of matter as such, which is here for man's use; man's use does not change the essence of phenomena which are dead, inert and insensitive, and there is no intrinsic value in nature." Moreover, "nature is lifeless and valueless."⁸⁹

It seems that this simple principle makes it legitimate for modern man to set traps for nature in the form of experiments, carefully observing its workings and deducing the particular steps involved. From now on, as Merchant argues, the man of science must not think that the "inquisition of nature is in any part interdicted and forbidden." Nature must be "bound into service" and made a "slave," put "in constraint" and "molded" by mechanical arts. The "searchers and spies of nature" are to discover

⁸⁶ Andrew Mclaughlin, "Images and Ethics of Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985), 294.

⁸⁷ İbrahim Özdemir, *The Ethical Dimension of Human Attitude Towards Nature*, 2nd edition (Istanbul: İnsan Publications, 2008), 37.

⁸⁸ Mclaughlin.

⁸⁹ Özdemir, 52-53.

her plots and secrets.”⁹⁰ “Our main object,” says Bacon, “is to make nature serve the business and conveniences of man.”⁹¹ It is argued that it is this characteristic of Baconian science that degraded and made possible the exploitation of the natural environment.⁹²

In contrast to this perception of nature, for Iqbal it is an imperative for any reader of the Qur’an to see and approach nature as an organic entity full of life and meaning, to be discovered and articulated by humanity. He argues that “Islam, recognizing the contact of the ideal with the real, says ‘yes’ to the world of matter and points the way to master it with a view to discovering a basis for a realistic regulation of life.”⁹³ Here, the concept of “mastery” is crucial to understand Iqbal’s human-nature relations. However, as mentioned before, his concept of nature and mastery over it are totally different from the Baconian one.

Iqbal, asks himself “What, then, according to the Qur’an, is the character of the universe which we inhabit?”⁹⁴ He responds on the Qur’anic basis that “it is not the result of a mere creative sport” as the Qur’an makes it clear from the very beginning: “We have not created the Heavens and the earth and whatever is between them in sport. We have not created them but for a serious end: but the greater part of them understand it not.”⁹⁵ Moreover, Iqbal supports his argument by quoting relevant verses from the Qur’an.⁹⁶ Thus, as argued earlier, according to Iqbal, “the universe is so constituted that it is capable of extension,” and therefore, “it is not a block universe, a finished product, immobile and incapable of change. Deep in its inner being lies, perhaps, the dream of a new birth.”⁹⁷ For someone who is familiar with the spirit of the Qur’an, it is not surprising to see Iqbal using the concept of “deep” a few decades earlier than the Deep Ecology Movement. Iqbal moreover describes this deep as “this

⁹⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 169.

⁹¹ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, Part II, ch. 31, in *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, ed. John M. Robertson (New York: Free Press, 1905), 337; William Leiss, “Utopia and Technology: Reflections on the Conquest of Nature,” *International Social Sciences Journal* 22 (1970), 580.

⁹² Merchant.

⁹³ Iqbal, 9.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁵ The Qur’an, 44:38-39.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:190-191.

⁹⁷ Iqbal, 10.

mysterious swing and impulse of the universe, this noiseless swim of time which appears to us, human beings.” This is why the Qur’an regards and presents to us (24:44) “the movement of day and night” as “one of the greatest signs of God.”⁹⁸

Iqbal argues that the “immensity of time and space carries in it the promise of a complete subjugation by man whose duty is to reflect on the signs of God, and thus discover the means of realizing his conquest of Nature as an actual fact.”⁹⁹ It is not difficult to deduce that the very nature of this subjugation and conquest of Nature must be different from the materialistic and mechanical perception of nature. To support his argument, Iqbal quotes relevant verses from the Qur’an¹⁰⁰ and suggests the real dimensions of nature as follows:

Every possibility is *the word of God*; hence *nature is the materialisation of the word of God*. It has different names – the tangible word, the sum of the realities of man, the arrangement of the Divinity, the spread of Oneness, the expression of the Unknown, the phases of Beauty, the trace of names and attributes, and the object of God’s knowledge.¹⁰¹

As such, Iqbal suggests that Islam, “as a cultural movement, rejects the old static view of the universe, and reaches a dynamic view” which may be summarized as follows: “The Ultimate Reality, according to the Qur’an, is spiritual, and its life consists in its temporal activity. The spirit finds its opportunities in the natural, the material, the secular. All that is secular is, therefore, sacred in the roots of its being.”¹⁰² Therefore, Iqbal argues “there is no such thing as a profane world. All this immensity of matter constitutes a scope for the self-realization of spirit. All is holy ground.” Interestingly, he quotes the Prophet’s words “The whole of this earth is a mosque” as an indication of the sacred dimension of the world.¹⁰³ These superb words of the Prophet also found expression in Iqbal’s poetry:

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ The Qur’an, 31:20, 16:12.

¹⁰¹ Muhammed Iqbal, *Speeches, Writings, and Statements of Iqbal*, ed. Latif Ahmad Sherwani (3rd rev. and enlarged ed.) (Lahore, 1977), 94 (italics added).

¹⁰² Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 147-148.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Through the bounty of the ruler of our faith,
 the entire earth became our mosque.
 The King of the Faith said to the Muslims:
 ‘The whole earth is my mosque.’¹⁰⁴

The spiritual and moral implication of this and the context in which Iqbal uses it lie by themselves, the foundation for an ethics of care and responsibility for nature.

To conclude, despite all said on the issue at hand, it would, I think, be quite misplaced to claim Iqbal as the patron thinker of Muslim environmental ethics as we know that debates and discussions on environmental ethics and the relevance of the non-human as ethical objects commenced as early as the 1970s, if we do not extend this to include Rachel Carson’s seminal book from 1962, *The Silent Spring*. However, this paper has looked at Iqbal’s poetic and philosophical works in the hope of finding a firm metaphysical basis for environmental ethics for the rest of creation, for love of the Creator, who created the elegant universe with purpose, balance, and beauty, full of meaning for the spiritual and material well-being of humans. However, such a hope is by no means entirely misplaced. Iqbal, with his deep knowledge of the East and West, perhaps more than any other modern philosopher, was aware of the problems besetting humanity in general and Muslims in particular. Therefore, he concerned himself with the integration of metaphysics and ethics to awaken in his fellow man a higher consciousness of himself with God and nature. He tried to cultivate what can only be described as an attitude of reverence for God, humanity, and nature.

Although it seems that his ethics have anthropocentric appeal at first glance, a deeper analysis of his thought would reveal that his perfect man is not a despot to exploit nature, but a vice-gerent of God who works with God to make a better nature as well as a better future for humanity. Although man, placed at the top of the hierarchy of creation, has a privileged place in the universe, it is not in the sense of an enlightenment project, but in the Qur’anic sense and by taking the Prophet Muhammad, the perfect man, as his or her role model in life. Moreover, as Mir underlines very eloquently, “the Perfect Man ‘infuses life into hearts’; he becomes the true representative of God on earth—Iqbal calls him *na’ib-i Haqq*, ‘God’s Vicegerent.’”¹⁰⁵ In summary, with his concepts of God, the human and the universe as dynamic, organic, purposeful,

¹⁰⁴ See, Muhammed Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, www.alhassanain.org/english. 150, fn, 22.

¹⁰⁵ Mir, 31 (italics added).

and meaningful entities, full of signs pointing to Ultimate Reality and the human being as *God's Vicegerent* on earth, an engaged environmentalist may find in Iqbal's system an inexhaustible metaphysical source of inspiration to develop an Islamic ethics of care for the environment. Moreover, keeping in mind Iqbal's background and engagement with Western philosophy in a critical spirit will render his poetic and philosophical thinking a source of inspiration for non-Muslims, also.

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