# Iqbāl-Nāmah

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## The Problem of Space: Zeno, Bergson, and Russell

[*The following selection is taken from the second lecture, "The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience," in Muhammad Iqbal's* The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Aademy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 28–30. In it, Iqbal takes up the issue of the reality of space, which has engaged the attention of thinkers classical and modern, Muslim and non-Muslim, and comments on the views of Zeno of Elea (495–*ca. *430 BC), Henri-Louis Bergson (1859–1941), and Bertrand Arthur William Russell (1872–1970). The passage in Iqbal's book includes a brief statement of the views of classical Muslim thinkers on the subject, but that discussion has been omitted here to keep the discussion focused on Western thinkers.*]

The ancient Greek philosopher Zeno approached the problem of space through the question of movement in space. His arguments for the unreality of movement are well known to the students of philosophy, and ever since his days the problem has persisted in the history of thought and received the keenest attention from successive generations of thinkers. Two of these arguments may be noted here. Zeno, who took space to be infinitely divisible, argued that movement in space is impossible. Before the moving body can reach the point of its destination it must pass through half the space intervening between the point of start and the point of destination; and before it can pass through that half it must travel through the half of the half, and so on to infinity. We cannot move from one point of space to another without passing through an infinite number of points in the intervening space. But it is impossible to pass through an infinity of points in a finite time. He further argued that the flying arrow does not move, because at any time during the course of its flight it is at rest in some point of space. Thus Zeno held that movement is only a deceptive appearance and that Reality is one and immutable. The unreality of movement means the unreality of an independent space. . . . Of modern thinkers the French philosopher Bergson and the British mathematician Bertrand Russell have tried to refute Zeno's arguments from their respective standpoints. To Bergson movement, as true change, is the fundamental Reality. The paradox of Zeno is due to a wrong apprehension of space and time which are regarded by Bergson only as intellectual views of movement. It is not possible to develop here the argument of Bergson without a fuller treatment of the metaphysical concept of life on which the whole argument is based. Bertrand Russell's argument proceeds on Cantor's theory of mathematical continuity which he looks upon as one of the most important discoveries of modern mathematics. Zeno's argument is obviously based on the assumption that space and time consist of infinite number of points and instants. On this assumption it is easy to argue that since between two points the moving body will be out of place, motion is impossible, for there is no place for it to take place. Cantor's discovery shows that space and time are continuous. Between any two points in space there is an infinite number of points, and in an

infinite series no two points are next to each other. The infinite divisibility of space and time means the compactness of the points in the series; it does not mean that points are mutually isolated in the sense of having a gap between one another. Russell's answer to Zeno, then, is as follows:

> Zeno asks how can you go from one position at one moment to the next position at the next moment without in the transition being at no position at no moment? The answer is that there is no next position to any position, no next moment to any moment because between any two there is always another. If there were infinitesimals movement would be impossible, but there are none. Zeno therefore is right in saying that the arrow is at rest at every moment of its flight, wrong in inferring that therefore it does not move, for there is a one-one correspondence in a movement between the infinite series of positions and the infinite series of instants. According to this doctrine, then it is possible to affirm the reality of space, time, and movement, and yet avoid the paradox in Zeno's arguments.

Thus Bertrand Russell proves the reality of movement on the basis of Cantor's theory of continuity. The reality of movement means the independent reality of space and the objectivity of Nature. But the identity of continuity and the infinite divisibility of space is no solution of the difficulty. Assuming that there is a one-one correspondence between the infinite multiplicity of instants in a finite interval of time and an infinite multiplicity of points in a finite portion of space, the difficulty arising from the divisibility remains the same. The mathematical conception of continuity as infinite series applies not to movement regarded as an act, but rather to the picture of movement as viewed from the outside. The act of movement, i.e. movement as lived and not as thought, does not admit of any divisibility. The flight of the arrow observed as a passage in space is divisible, but its flight regarded as an act, apart from its realization in space, is one and incapable of partition into a multiplicity. In partition lies its destruction.

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## Entwine Yourself with the Morning Breeze

[*The following poem is taken from Part II of Muhammad Iqbal's* Zabūr-i ʿAjam *("Psalms of Persia"). It highlights the importance of setting lofty goals. In verse 1, Iqbal, speaking as a representative of the Muslim community, claims to have broken through the barrier posed to human ambition by the sky and, by implication, invites the community to follow his lead. In verse 2, he asks the typical Muslim, whom he addresses as a falcon, to beware of getting accustomed to an easy lifestyle, for such a lifestyle renders one incapable of engaging in the struggle of life. In verse 3, he castigates the defeatist mentality of the Muslim, who believes that a life lived in passivity—a life lived like the dust that has settled on the ground and is bereft of all movement—will save one from the vicissitudes of life. In verse 4, he urges his addressees to regard all milestones as temporary and to move beyond the highest visible destinations in the universe. In verse 5, Iqbal expresses his love of God in a novel way: Mount Sinai has the honor of being the place where God manifested Himself when Moses expressed his wish to see God, but the mountain derives its distinction solely from its association with God, in isolation from whom it has no worth at all. In verse 6, Iqbal says that those truly dedicated to higher goals lose interest in the more mundane aspects of life: martyred by love, they are too deeply absorbed in thinking about their beloved to have time for ceremony or formality, or for tactful behavior, in a social situation. In the last verse, Iqbal says that the treasures hidden in his poetry will be discovered and appreciated only after his death.*

*From this brief discussion, it is not difficult to see that the poem has a fairly high degree of unity of thought. The dominant theme is exhortation to the addressees—Muslims—to shake off lethargy and embark on a voyage of self-realization by establishing ever higher goals in life.*]

برون این گنبد در بسته پیدا کردم راهی — که از اندیشه برتر می پرد آه سحرگاهی
تو ای شاهین نشیمن در چمن کردی از آن ترسم — هوای او ببال تو دهد پرواز کوتاهی
غباری گشته ای آسوده دامان ز پستی ها — بباد صبحدم در پیچ و منشین بر سر راهی
ز جوی کهکشان بگذر ز نیل آسمان بگذر — ز منزل دل مبر دگر چه باشد منزل ماهی
اگر زان برق بی پروا درون او تپشی گردد — به چشم کوه سینا می نیرزد با پر کاهی
چسان آداب محفل را که دارند می سوزند — مپرس از ما شهیدان نگاه بر سر راهی

پس از من شعر من چون آنند در یابند و میگویند
جهانی را دگرگون کرد یک مرد خود آگاهی

*Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 404–405

**Translation**

I have devised a way out of this dome of shut doors—
For, the sigh of dawn soars higher than thought.[1]

Falcon, you have made your nest in the garden, but I am afraid
That fancying it will give your wings a short-ranger's flight.[2]

Are you become dust? One may not live here and be at ease.
Entwine yourself with the morning breeze, and do not sit by the roadside.[3]

Go past the stream of the Milky Way, and past the Nile of the sky—
A destination, though it be the moon, spells death to the heart.[4]

If that nonchalant lightning vacates its premises,
Then, to me, Mount Sinai is not worth a straw.[5]

How to observe decorum in company and be on fire?—
Do not ask that of us, martyrs to a glance cast along the way.[6]

After me, they will read my verse, will find pearls in it, and will say:
A man possessed of self-awareness turned this world upside down.[7]

## Notes

[1]**I have. . . thought.** Iqbal compares the sky to a dome, one that is sealed shut, preventing all exit. For all its vastness, the universe is like a prison—or so a person with boundless ambition would feel. In other words, the universe hems us in, and it is desirable, though difficult, to overcome the limitations imposed by the conditions of existence. The second hemistich explains what enabled Iqbal to find an opening through the sky: it was "the sigh of dawn."

In several languages, the sky represents the *ne plus ultra* of human endeavor. For example, the English saying "The sky is the limit," while signifying limitlessness, does set up the sky as the highest point reachable by human ambition, as does the more mundane word "skyscraper." Usually, thought is credited with the ability to reach the sky, as in the Persian phrase *fikr-i falak rasā*, "sky-soaring thought." But Iqbal, while making due allowance for the efficacy of thought, posits the "sigh of dawn" as a more powerful instrument for the purpose of reaching even beyond the sky. Both in his poetry and in his prose, Iqbal weighs up the relative merits of reason and love—the cognitive-cerebral element and the intuitive-affective element, respectively, in the human makeup—giving an edge to the latter since reason, born of the need to solve practical problems, is subject to the limitations of practical reality—the sky representing such limitations—whereas love, born of the urge to see reality as a whole and to unite with the maker of that reality, rises above such limitations, tearing apart the barriers of the sky. Here, it may not be amiss to quote the opening stanza of Iqbal's well-known Urdu poem *Jawāb-i Shikwah* ("Reply to the Complaint"), a companion piece to another famous poem, *Shikwah* ("Complaint"). In the latter poem, Iqbal wonders why Muslims, who believe in the religion brought by the last prophet, Muḥammad, and who have served God so selflessly in history, should have such a miserable lot in the world and why the unbelievers should be so much better off than them. *Jawāb-i Shikwah* begins with Iqbal noting that his complaint cut its way through the heavens:

> The word that issues from the heart has effect;
> It lacks wings, but it has the power to fly.
> Angelic in origin, it trains its eyes on high;
> It arises from dust, but it roams the skies.
> My love was mutinous, wild, and ingenious—
> My bold lament cleaved the heavens.
>
> *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 227

The semantic connection between "lament" (*nālah*) in the poem from *Jawāb-i Shikwah* and "sigh" (*āh*) in the poem under discussion will not be missed.

The "sigh of dawn" is a typical Islamic image used here by Iqbal to make the philosophical point that love is superior to reason. The "sigh" in the verse is the one drawn at the time of the first of the five daily prayers—namely, the dawn prayer. More specifically, it is the sigh drawn by a person in the act of prayer at that time and betokens one's pining love for God. There is a subtle hint in Iqbal's verse that humble submission to God would exalt human beings more than an exercise of reason would: intellectual thought, which arrogantly aims to figure out the reality of the Godhead, is checked in its upward flight by the celestial barrier, whereas a sigh drawn in devotion to God pierces through the heavens and reaches God. Also, the "sigh" drawn by one at dawn signifies one's complete submission to God and, as such, is an acknowledgment of one's humanity. This acknowledgment ties in with Iqbal's firm belief that human beings can reach their full potential only as human beings and not—as some believe—by aspiring to become God. In one place, Iqbal pointedly says that he would not give up servantship to God (*bandagī*) in exchange for the Godhead (*khudā'ī*) itself, even if he had the option to do so.

The phrase "sigh of dawn" in the verse could be alluding to the *ḥadīth* in which Muḥammad says that one must beware of the complaint made to God by a person who has been wronged because there is no barrier between that complaint and God—the complaint being potent enough to rend its way through the heavens.

In the first hemistich, the tone of the Persian phrase *paydā kardah-am rāhī*, here translated as "I have devised a way," suggests that, in having found a way out of the prison-like universe—"this dome of shut doors"—Iqbal has succeeded where others have failed. The hemistich can be interpreted as representing the claim that Iqbal frequently makes in his poetry—namely, that he has an important message for the Muslim community, a message that, if heeded, can deliver his addressees from the morass of backwardness and stagnation in which they find themselves. But to the claim made in the first hemistich is opposed a disclaimer in the second: Iqbal's solution for the Muslim community's problems is not original to Iqbal; it is an old solution, grounded in the pristine Islamic tradition—it is the "sigh of dawn," or the dawn prayer, or the total submission to God that has always constituted the core of Islamic religion. As such, Iqbal's verse can be seen as an invitation to Muslims to return to the sources of their religious tradition, for these sources alone will furnish the guidance, strength, and vision needed to break through the "shut doors," the walls of ignorance and hopelessness that surround Muslims on all sides, keeping them from making any headway in life. In other words, Iqbal's role as a poet-visionary is merely to remind his community of a lesson it has forgotten and revive a message it has neglected. The little Persian particle that starts the second hemistich—*kih*, "for"—has both an explanatory and a corroborative meaning: "It is through the agency of the 'sigh of dawn' that I have found a way out of the 'dome of shut doors'" (explanation) and "It is, in fact, the case—is it not?—that the 'sigh of dawn' has the power to pierce through the heavens?"(corroboration).

[2]**Falcon, you . . . flight.** The falcon can maintain its strength and alacrity only if it lives a life of freedom and adventure and shuns the life of ease and comfort. A falcon that takes a fancy to a garden and makes its nest in it gradually loses the power of its wings since it becomes content to hop from one comfortable spot of the garden to another and is no longer able to assert its independence of its environment by undertaking long, though arduous, journeys in a state of freedom. The proper residence for a falcon, therefore, is not a garden, which will turn it into a bird with a limited flying range, but—as Iqbal says elsewhere—a rocky mountain.

In this verse, as in many others, Iqbal calls Muslims falcons that have given up their age-old ways of austerity, hardihood, and daring and have, instead, settled for an enervating lifestyle that brings neither glory nor dignity. The verse implies that Muslims must resume an active lifestyle and must not flinch from accepting the challenges of life.

The verse contains a perfect instance of wordplay. The phrase "fancying it" in the second hemistich is, in the original, *hawā-i ū*. The word *hawā* means both "desire" and "air," and either of the two meanings would nicely fit the context. Thus, the words "fancying it" in the translation might be substituted by "its air," that is, the air of the garden, the hemistich now reading: "Its air will give your wings a short-ranger's flight."

[3]**Are you . . . roadside?** Do not justify your life of inaction by arguing that you are powerless to act, that you are overwhelmed by outside forces, that you are no better than dust that cannot rise from the ground. Even if you have been reduced to dust, you still have the ability to ride the wind, in a literal sense: team up with the morning breeze—get entwined with it—and move around, affirming yourself and making an impact on the world. If you become a fatalist and sit by the roadside, the world will pass you by, or, rather, will trample you underfoot, for, in this world, idleness does not guarantee peace and quiet. The principle of life is constant movement, and those who neglect this principle, becoming idle and taking the path of least resistance, are in for a rude shock.

[4]**Go past . . . heart.** This verse builds on the preceding one. The hallmark of life is constant movement. To be truly and fully alive, one must refuse to regard any destination as final, even if it happens to be a destination as alluring as the Milky Way, which, like a stream, runs through the heavens, or as fascinating as the sky, which, in its vast stretch, is like the river Nile. It is noble to aspire to reach the Milky Way or the sky, but even these must be regarded as transit stations, for there are worlds and galaxies to conquer beyond them. To take any destination as final, even if it is as lovely and charming as the moon, is to read the obituary of one's own heart, for the heart has limitless ambition, and it is unwise to curb that ambition.

In the Persian original, the first hemistich has a wordplay: the word *nīl* means both "Nile" and "the blue *or* indigo color."

[5]**If that nonchalant . . . straw.** Mount Sinai is hallowed because of its association with God; otherwise, there is nothing special about it. The verse alludes to Qurʾān 7:143, which speaks of God's response to Moses' request to see God with his eyes: "When His Lord manifested Himself on the mountain, He crushed it, and Moses fell down lightning-struck." The "lightning" in Iqbal's verse, therefore, is God, who is described as "nonchalant"—*bī-parwā* in the original. Neither the Persian *bī-parwā* nor the English "nonchalant" is to be understood in the sense of "careless" or "callous." Both words have a meaning very close to that of the Arabic word *ghanī*, which means "one who does not suffer from any want or deficiency and is, therefore, self-sufficient." *Ghanī*, in fact, is one of the attributive names of God in the Qurʾān, denoting God's freedom from imperfection or contingency. Muslim scholars often explain this Divine name by saying that God is beyond human praise and criticism—that no amount of praise, howsoever great, will add anything to God's glory (for His glory is infinite, to begin with) and that no amount of criticism, howsoever sharp, will detract from God's majesty (for His majesty is undiminishable). Put differently, the word "nonchalant" means "noncontingent" or "absolute." It is this "nonchalant lightning" that gives value and meaning to Mount Sinai, and, if Mount Sinai becomes disassociated from God, then it becomes just another mountain. And it is this "nonchalant lightning" with which the poet is in love and which he seeks and pines for when he thinks of Mount Sinai.

The phrase *barq-i bī-parwā* in the verse echoes a common motif in Persian and Urdu love poetry. Poets in both languages speak of the nonchalant attitude of the female beloved—though by "nonchalant," in this context, they mean "indifferent" and "unpitying," the beloved being totally unconcerned with the fate of the devoted but hapless lover. By using the word *bī-parwā* in the sense of "self-sufficient" to describe God, Iqbal's verse adds another nuance to the meaning of a familiar term in the poetical stock-in-trade of Persian and Urdu. In more specific terms, since the context of Iqbal's verse is religious (as indicated by the verse's implied reference to the above-cited Qurʾānic verse), Iqbal uses the word *bī-parwā* with a theological suggestion, but without wrenching the word from its amatory connotations in Persian and Urdu poetry. Thus, his use of the word represents a synthesis of the mundane and the religious. It is God as the *barq-i bī-parwā*, or the "nonchalant lightning," with whom Iqbal is in love.

There is a definite hint in the verse that Iqbal—who speaks in the first person in the verse—wishes to cast himself in the role of a Moses-like figure. Moses, God's devoted servant, went on Mount Sinai not to honor the mountain but to meet God, the importance of the mountain deriving from the fact that God chose the mountain as a site for His self-manifestation. But there is a difference between the situation of Moses and that of Iqbal. Moses, when he went to Mount Sinai to meet God, had no prior knowledge of the consequences of his encounter with God: he did not anticipate being struck by lightning and losing consciousness. But to Iqbal—who, of course, has the benefit of hindsight—the essence of the Mosaic encounter with God is the intense experience of being overwhelmed by the lightning-like appearance of God on the mountain, and it is this experience of being swept off his feet, as it were, by the presence of God that he desires and looks forward to.

The verse can be taken as a criticism of religious formalism: the outer, physical structures of religion are important as carriers of spiritual values, but it is a mistake to regard them as the be-all and end-all; those structures have significance only insofar as they serve as pointers to a higher reality—namely, God.

The literal translation of the first hemistich would be: "If its [Mount Sinai's] inside is emptied of that nonchalant lightning."

[6]**How to observe . . . way.** Those who are intoxicated with love may lack suavity of manner in dealing with people—and understandably: their deep and single-minded devotion to the object of their love makes them indifferent to social approval. Having little time for smooth courtesies and polite formalities, they may be seen as flouting the restrictions imposed by the so-called code of proper social behavior or etiquette. If ever a question arises about the possibility of observing the rules of *politesse* while being consumed by love, then Iqbal confesses not to know the answer, for he is like one who has been martyred by a single glance of the beloved in a chance encounter, and one so martyred becomes heedless of the world and of the demands that worldly life makes on one. Iqbal's confession is, actually, a critique of those who think that it is possible to be intoxicated by love and yet succeed in observing decorum in the company of others—that is, in dealing with people in a

practical or calculated manner in ordinary life—for intoxication and sobriety are mutually exclusive, and one who claims to be both intoxicated and sober makes a false claim. The love that Iqbal is speaking of is the love of God, and the essential point Iqbal wishes to make is that one who is truly in love with God becomes dead to the world.

The foregoing should make it clear that, while, on the face of it, the verse raises a question and then immediately says that Iqbal may not be asked the question since he would not know the answer, the real thrust of the verse lies in the critique of the very possibility of serving two masters—God and the world.

There is, at least, a tangential connection between this verse and the preceding one. Iqbal, who speaks in the first person in this verse as well, can be seen here as attempting to identify himself with Moses. Moses, who fell down lightning-struck when God manifested Himself on Mount Sinai (see last note), can be said to be one of those people who became "martyrs to a glance cast along the way," Iqbal being another such martyr.

[7]**After me . . . down.** The revolutionary potential of Iqbal's poetry will be realized only after he is gone. People will, then, read his poetry, discover gems of wisdom in it, and be amazed at its powerful influence on both the thought and the conduct of nations across the globe. The statement might appear to be an exaggeration, but, in the Muslim world at least, few thinkers have won the respect and admiration of both the intelligentsia and the common people as Iqbal has: in the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia, in Iran and Turkey, in Malaysia and Indonesia, and in many other countries, Iqbal's poetry is read in the original or in translation, is sung to music, and is commented on by scholars and writers. In the West, too, Iqbal's name is not unfamiliar in academic circles, and many universities have awarded doctorates for research on Iqbal.

"A man possessed of self-awareness"(*yak mard-i khud-āgāhī*) makes reference to an aspect of the central concept of *khudī* ("selfhood") in Iqbal: a man who is aware of his limitless potential to bring about change for the better in his own life and in his environment alone is capable of providing a powerful vision to his community and society, and Iqbal feels that he is such a person.

There is a note of sadness in the verse. Although he achieved legendary fame within his lifetime, Iqbal often said that his contemporaries did not fully understand his thought and that true recognition of his work would come only much later.

The last verse of the poem reverts, in thought, to the first. The opening verse spoke of Iqbal's success in opening up a way through the "dome of shut doors"—that is, of carving out a new path that his addressees—Muslims—might take and, thus, get out of the groove they are stuck in. The concluding verse says, rather wistfully, that the addressees will realize the significance of the new path discovered by Iqbal only after Iqbal has left the world.

*Mustansir Mir*

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## The Power of Minorities

The fate of the world has been principally decided by minorities. The history of Europe bears ample testimony to the truth of this proposition. It seems to me that there is a pychological reason why minorities should have been a powerful factor in the history of mankind. Character is the invisible force which determines the destinies of nations, and an intense character is not possible in a majority. It is a force: the more it is distributed, the weaker it becomes.

*Muhammad Iqbal,* Stray Reflections*, revised edition, ed. Javid Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), 79*

## The Worth of Things

God created things; man created the worth of things. The immortality of a people depends upon their incessant creation of "worths," said Nietzsche. Things certainly bear the stamp of Divine manufacture; but their meaning is through and through human.

*Muhammad Iqbal,* Stray Reflections*, revised edition, ed. Javid Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), 87*

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