

Human Psyche in Islam: A Brief Analysis of its Basic Principles

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1. Introduction

Human psyche has remained a good concern in both the Western and the Muslim thought. In the Western tradition the Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle and modern scholars like Descartes, Bradley and later on Carl Jung and William James made significant insights into it. Muslim thinkers while focusing on the Qur'an and Sunnah of Prophet Mohammad (SAAS) discussed human psyche in a good deal and amplified its various aspects in philosophical and Sufi contexts. The present paper makes a humble attempt to approach human psyche (the self) in Islam and examines its basic dimensions of animating the life, infusing the Divine Spirit in man and his consciousness about evil (*fujur*) and good (*taqwa*). In the background the Western tradition of thought, the paper highlights the distinguished character of the Islamic concept of psyche in terms of its spiritual and intellectual nature that affects substantively to the development of human personality.

2. Psyche in the Western Thought

Among the Greeks, Plato (428-347 BC) is much talked about treating the soul and its activities calling it partly a rational. He views soul characteristic of cognitive and intellectual traits. It is something as that reasons, renders judgment and virtues of courage and justice, particularly if it is a wise soul. It is divided into two parts- spiritual one (representing nobler impulses) and desire inducing (respecting appetite and passions) and they are further described as higher and lower parts of it respectively.¹ Plato considers immortality of soul in its simplicity and purity and the body is a prison for it. The body becomes a hindrance to the intellectual aspiration of soul.² The separation of body from soul is death and the general idea, however, of the Greek about soul is that it is the substance

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that animates, the living and an individual enables to reason, decide and act. This was understood as psyche by the Greeks and later on came to be known in English “soul” or “mind.”

Aristotle (384-322 BC), the pupil of Plato, thinks of human soul resembling of the plant that controls the vital function and the animal soul has the faculties of perception, imagination, memory, desire etc. To him sense perception is a change produced by a thing perceived and the object is here recognized actually what he calls unique is ‘creative reason’ that comes from without and existed before the soul and body. The interpreters of Aristotle identify it with “universal reason or the mind of god.”³ The neo-Platonian theory of soul, however, finds earthly life as a fall, to its original freedom and supremacy. To this school, it is termed from god-ward to body-ward and the latter is sensuous and material life and if some light radiates in it, it is merely the shadow of real self.⁴

In the early modern Western thought the soul is considered as distinctive from the body and this got pronounced in Rene Descarte’s (1596-1650AD) philosophy of body and mind dualism. To him both are different entities yet have some mysterious relations:

It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on one hand, I have clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking thing. But accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it.⁵

Here a clear differentiation is made between the two entities, one represents physical trait being extended (finding a form and space) yet is not conscious while the other has mental trait of consciousness and is derived of physical characteristics. Although both are described a separable yet are closely related together and make up a composite being in the form of an individual being. In his estimate of this theory. Absar Ahmad, holds that ‘just in the philosophy of Plato the emphasis was laid on man’s twin elements in the form of rational soul (psyche or nous) and

body (soma) similarly emphasis was laid by Descartes on self-consciousness, on the spiritual substance, the whole essence of which is to think.’⁶

A little mention may be also made about the thinkers who belong to the field of psychology and whose views about psyche are quite significant. No doubt, the very definition of psychology involves its being as ‘originally the principle of life yet used generally equivalent to mentality or a substitute for mind or soul.’ That is why it is called ‘the study of the mind, mental life or human experience.’⁷ In this regard Carl Jung (1875-1961AD) and William James (1842-1969) are interesting who have made some special elaborations about the subject. The former is known for his analytical psychology who holds that psyche comprises two parts—conscious and unconscious. Conscious is a psychic event sensed by ego while unconsciousness is one that is not sensed by ego.⁸ As such self constitutes whole of personality and ego is concerned only with conscious psyche. Unconsciousness is further classified into personal and collective unconscious and it underscores his concern with the spiritual grounding of the psyche. It refutes the view that psyche is a product of bio-chemical process. Jung writes:

The conflict of the material and spiritual aspect of life only shows the psyche is in the last resort an incomprehensible something. Without a doubt psychic happenings constitute our only, immediate experience. All our knowledge is conditioned by the psyche which, because it alone is conditional, is superlatively real.⁹

In this context, William James also makes some considerable observations, he views psychology as ‘the science of mental life, both of the phenomena and of their conditions.’¹⁰ By the mental life he means consciousness and by phenomena is meant subject matter proved in experience. His laying emphasis on consciousness is not, however, of analytic character but upon its functional utility. Consciousness described

also as 'stream of consciousness' in James is a complete and dynamic entity and stimulates the adaption to the environment.¹¹

3. Psyche in the Islamic context

Islam has a unique view of life. It views both man and universe as the creation of God. Though man depicts a deep relation with his society yet he is primarily addressed as an individual being in the Qur'an and it is his individuality or personality that is emphasized upon. In Islam, it is unique in terms of its innate potentialities and their due growth culminates in a good personality. By human psyche is meant the constituent element of individuality particularly its internal aspect known as inner self or soul of man. To approach human psyche is to understand the inner self or the role of soul in the personality development of man. Psyche in Islam can be understood by analysing its following dimensions:

a) A Life Giving Process

The soul supports human life both in terms of its physical and spiritual aspects. A human composition, in primordial sense, is made of clay and then ensouled to give it a physical and spiritual life. It is a process of animation and consciousness in man. The Qur'an refers to it as:

Now, indeed, We created man out of the essence of clay, and then We caused him to remain as a drop of sperm (in the sperm of germ-cell and then We created within the embryonic lump bones, and then We clothed the bones with flesh and then We sought (all this) into a new creation: hollowed, therefore is God, the best of creators.¹²

The human sperm thus passes through the stages of embryonic cell, embryonic lump bones, bones with flesh till it is turned into a 'new creation' of a smooth human being.¹³ This formation of a new creation is by imbuing with soul that provides it with physical and spiritual life. The inorganic substances get breathed into life and attains consciousness by the soul in it. In fact, breathing of soul-spirit into it is more related to moral and spiritual consciousness of man than to its

ordinary physical livelihood. According to Prophet Muhammad's (SAAS) saying that after the completion of human fetus from *nutfah*(drop of sperm) *alaqah*'(a drop of germ cell or dot) and *mudgahah*(embryonic lump bones) that takes forty days then an angel, from Allah, comes and breathes soul into it.¹⁴ This is further expressed in the Qur'an itself that Allah is the best of creator, and human self is designed by Him as 'the best of moulds.'

Verily We have created man in the best of conformation or in the best of moulds.¹⁵

b) Infusion of Divine Spirit

This is a seminal dimension of human self which it is imbued with Divine element. The element provides the divine base and attribute to human self. It is a pure and righteous element in the self or soul and forms its essence as well and is generally expressed at various places in the Qur'an in various ways. In Surat *al—Haj* its reference is made as following:

And to, thy Lord said unto the angels: 'Behold, 'I am about to create mortal man out of sounding clay, out of some transmitted; and when I have formed him fully and breathed into him My spirit fall down before him in prostration.¹⁶

In Al-Sajdah, the theme is indicated in the following words:

Thus, He begins the creation of man out of clay; then he causes him to be begotten out of the essence of a humble fluid; and then he forms him in accordance with what he is meant to be, and breathes into him the Spirit, and [thus, O man,] He endows you with hearing, and sight and feelings as well as minds; [yet] how seldom you are grateful.¹⁷

Breathing into man His spirit by God is of great moral and spiritual significance. Though some commentators of the Qur'an are described as not having treated these verses with desirable consideration yet on the whole the too mark a good amplification of the subject. Among

them include Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad. Muhammad Asad says that it is a metaphor for the Divine gift of life and consciousness or of a “soul.”¹⁸ Abdullah Yusuf Ali by it means three things (1)the faculty of God-like knowledge and will, which if rightly used, would give man superiority over other creatures; (2)the origin of evil in arrogance and jealousy on the part of Satan who saw only the lower side of man(his clay i.e., Somatic body) and failed to see the higher side the faculty brought in by the spirit of God (3) that this evil only touches those who yield to it, and has no power over God’s sincere servants purified by his grace. Adam is not here mentioned by name, but only Man, whose symbol is Adam.’¹⁹

Man’s faculty of having ‘God-like knowledge’ and ‘endowing him with consciousness’ is highlighted here by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. To Amin Ahsin Islahi, by breathing of Divine Spirit (*ruh*) is meant ‘Divine Spark’ which is the main source of man’s spiritual achievements and it unites him with God provided he attends it.²⁰ Maulana Sayyid ‘Abul ‘Ala Maudidi interprets it in two ways. ‘One is that by Spirit is not meant merely physical animation that makes the body a moving entity but it means the element that is the locus of consciousness, intellect and judgment. On account of this man is distinguished from other creatures and attains the unique personality by which he is vicegerent (*khilafah*) on this earth.’ The other meaning which Maudidi provides is that ‘man’s knowledge, thought, consciousness, will, judgement and other similar special traits actually belong to God and man depicts merely their impressions under the Wisdom and Will of God.’²¹This illustrates that the Spirit (*ruh*) elevates man to the position of God’s *khalifah*(vicegerency), a status of freedom and responsibility which is not enjoined by other creatures of the universe.

Both the philosophers and Sufis have elaborated this inner nature of man (self) in terms of Ruh(Divine Spirit). To Ibn Sina, (b.980AD) ‘soul is of two levels and one is called spirit (*ruh*) and the other the soul. At the transcendental level it is characteristic of purity and at the

phenomenal level it enters the body and animates it. His theory of being is emanationistic as he holds that from God who is primordial (*al-qadim*) flows the first intelligence or intellect (*al-aql-al-awwal*) which is equivalent of spirit. He also views that essence lies in God and intellect existed prior to the existence of the individual.²² Ibn Arabi (b.1165A.D) regards that uncreated aspect of spirit (*ruh*) present in man, is essentially one with God and man forms the perfect manifestation of Divine attributes.²³ Al Ghazzali (b.1058AD) describes *ruh* using symbolism of light as elemental light attaining in turn pure being who acts as the sun.²⁴ To him *ruh* is a life force that imparts power to body, vitalizes and controls it. Shahaib al—Din al—Surhrawardhi (b.1153AD) also talks of *ruh* in terms of ray of Divine intellect.²⁵ Al-Razi(b.) calls *ruh* to be eternal while intellect of man is created out of Divine substance.²⁶ To Ibn Miskawayh (d.1013AD) the essence of soul lies in motion which is of two kinds, one tends towards intellect and the other towards matter. By first motion man gets illuminated and then illuminates the matter.²⁷ Even Allama Iqbal, the leading Muslim philosophers of the modern times, describes human self which he calls ‘ego,’ as emanation from the Ultimate Ego (God) and it strives for realizing its end successfully. Iqbal says:

Thus the element of guidance and directive control the ego’s activity clearly shows that the ego is a free personal causality. He shares in the life and freedom of the Ultimate Ego, Who, by permitting the emergence of a finite ego, capable of private initiative has limited this freedom of his own free will. This freedom of conscious behaviour follows from the view of ego-activity which the Qur’an takes.²⁸

In his Persian *Kuliyat*, Iqbal refers to the vitality of the self as following.²⁹

Self owes its existence of God; As it owes its appearance also to God. I do not know how this shining sperm; would exist, without existence of sea.

c) **Consciousness of Good and Evil**

Human psyche is also distinguished by its cognitive nature. It is a conscious self that recognizes good and evil within it. In the expression of *nafs* (self) the Qur'an indicates this dimension of man and its manifold development. After mentioning the peculiar qualities of the natural objects in Surah *al-Shams* the perfect fashioning of *nafs* and its tendencies are referred to as following:

And by the Soul and by Him who perfectly proportioned it, and imbued it with (the consciousness) of its evil and piety. He who purifies will prosper and he who suppresses it will be ruined³⁰

In Surah *al-Balad* it is mentioned thus:

Have We not given him two eyes, and a tongue, and a pair of lips, and shown him the two highways [of good and evil]?³¹

In these verses and in similar other verses of the Qur'an, this conscious nature of the psyche is mentioned that signifies the growth of personality on the directions, chosen by the self. Modern commentators of the Qur'an like Maulana Maududi and Muhammad Asad also illustrates this aspect of human self in the marginal notes of their exegesis. The former takes this God's fashioning the personality of man in two meanings. 'First that the Creator has embedded in man's nature tendencies and inclinations towards both good and evil. Second, that God has impregnated every person's subconscious with certain notions of good and evil: that good and evil deeds are intrinsically different, and are not of equal worth; that while *fujur* (immorality), is condemnable, *taqwa* (avoidance of evil) is praiseworthy, etc. These ideas are not foreign to man. On the contrary, his nature is quite profoundly acquainted with them.³² The latter, Mohammad Asad, elaborates it by saying that 'the reference to man and that which constitutes the human personality, as well as the implied illusion to the extremely complex phenomenon of a life entity in which bodily needs

and urges, emotions and intellectual activities are so closely intertwined as to be indissoluble, follows organically upon a call consider the inescapable grandeur of the universe, so far as it is perceptible and comprehensible to man, a compelling evidence of God's creative power.' He further says that man is inspired with immoral doings and ego-consciousness, implying that he is 'equally liable to rise to great spiritual heights as to fall into utter immorality, an essential characteristic of human nature.'³³

In this way, human self or soul is imbued with knowledge of both evil and good and is fashioned in such a manner that it can develop its personality on the particular use of them. *Nafs* (self) will obviously grow towards its perfections when it will follows the directions of *taqwa* (piety), *shukr*(gratefulness), and morality, as against *fujur* (immorality) and ungratefulness to God. Personality development of man is designed on these bases in Islam. The Qur'an makes mention of three kinds of *nafs* (self) which characterize even the three stages of it vis-a-vis human personality. 1, *al-nafs al-ammarah bi al-su*, is the soul which commands man to evil and is hence passionate and egoistic³⁴.2, *al-nafs al-lawamah*, the soul which blames on evil doings and knows its imperfections. It is commonly called conscience.³⁵ 3, *al-nafs al-mutma'inah*, is a soul at peace, re-integrated in the Spirit and at rest in certainty.³⁶

This illustrates that *nafs* is not merely a negative entity as the word sometimes connotes in Sufi literature by placing it directly opposite to *ruh* (spirit) but is an abode of good and evil tendencies, depending upon man himself of its use. The discretion to use it as per ones will is the value of freedom (trust) by which man is distinguished from other creations of God. Similarly, choosing good and avoiding evil brings the proper growth in human personality to achieve his desirable spiritual as well as material goals successfully. Al Ghazzali rightly perceives this aspect of *nafs* as he points out that 'the essential element of it is not thought, perception or imagination, but will, through which

one comes to realize one's spiritual possibilities.³⁷ In other words *nafs* or self involves consciousness of both evil and good and the power of faculty that could distinguish them from each other and lead to the realization of right one, is the *qalb* (mind) of man.

d) Qalb (Mind) and its Role

Stating it that the self (psyche) comprises the aspects of animating physical living breathing of Divine Spirit and innate consciousness (*ilqa*) its one more dimension, however, is found in the faculty of *qalb*. Human self complex which is characteristic of unique transcendental, metaphysical nature and corporal nature becomes intelligible and interactive through the faculty of *qalb*. The word (*qalb*) is used both in the Qur'an and Hadith and sometimes *faud* is substituted for it. Muslim Sufis and theologians have also used it to indicate its significant role in the formation of human personality.

Qura'nically *qalb* is the intellectual cum intuitive faculty of man that explores the innate as well as the external sources of knowledge. *Qalb* is described as a supersensory organ of cognition through the activation of which is realized what is usually known as mystical experience. Even Sufi calls it the 'third stratum serving as the threshold of the divine dimension of being, constituting ontologically the middle domain between the world of pure light of God, and the world of material darkness under the dominion of Satan. Nevertheless, in simple words it constitutes the faculty that makes the self to comprehend the truths of it and adhere to them properly. Otherwise he is blind in terms of not using eye of his heart (*qalb*). The Qur'an affirms this behaviour of the arrogant men who turn against the reality of life. It is stated in the following words:

They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, nay even misguided, 'for they are heedless (of the warning).³⁸

In Surat *al-Hajj* the heart as a cognitive source to direct life is affirmed as following:

Have they, then, never journeyed about the earth, letting their hearts gain wisdom, and causing their ears to hear. Yet verily it is not their eyes that have become blind, but blind have become the hearts that are in their breasts.³⁹

By turning the heart blind make it to lose its status and becomes spiritually diseased that affects the true growth of human personality. God-consciousness, wisdom and morality is lost by man. On the other hand, if the heart is channelised properly it develops piety, morality and wisdom in man that fashions his personality justly and peacefully. This is stated by the Prophet (SAAS) in the following words:

Beware! In your body lies a piece of flesh. If it is in peace the whole body becomes peaceful and if it is disturbed it makes whole body disturbed. Beware! It is the heart (*qalb*).⁴⁰

The Prophet (SAAS) has asked for the heart (*qalb*) that may have fear of God (*khashiyah al-Allah*) in it. It is just in the manner he prays for the knowledge that is beneficial (*ilm-i-nafla*). It is also indicated that the heart (*qalb*) which is basically pure and unsullified is made stained or rusty by an evil deed. On repentance and forgiveness (*tawbah*) the sin gets washed off otherwise it leads to the sealing of the heart and eventually man dies a spiritual death.

4. Conclusion

From this foregoing analysis it becomes clear that the concern with the issue of human psyche is found in the scholars and intellectuals from the earlier times. In the Western tradition, the Greeks who are chiefly represented by Plato and Aristotle develop their views about it. To the former the psyche or soul is of rational character by its cognitive and intellectual factors and also manifests the spiritual and desire inducing (higher and lower) traits in it. To him immortality of soul lies in its simplicity and purity. Aristotle views the soul that has the faculties of

perceptions, imagination, memory, and desire. He also makes mention of 'creative reason' that comes from without, and his interpreters take it as 'the universal soul.' Neo-Platonism, however, calls the earthly life of the soul as a fall to its freedom by turning from the God-ward to body-ward. In modern Western thought, Descartes' seems particularly interesting who makes a distinction between physical and mental traits of the self. The two though seem separate yet are closely related together. His emphasis on self-consciousness lies in the rational soul, the essence of which is to think. However it is the new developments in this tradition of thought, particularly in the field of psychology represented in the writings of Carl Jung and William James, that the aspects of the psyche find a special treatment. As an analytical psychologists, Carl Jung mentions the two parts of psyche, one is known as consciousness and the other is called unconsciousness of which the former is sensed by the ego while the latter is not. Though incomprehensible yet its presence is affirmed in Jungian theory and it gives a spiritual content to his analysis. William James while describing psychology 'the science of mental life, both of phenomena and their conditions emphasizes upon consciousness and experiential dimension of the self. Nevertheless, in this Western tradition considerable attempts to probe the nature of human psyche is made and many aspects like animating, reasoning, consciousness, collective unconsciousness are illustrated. On the other hand, approaching psyche (human self) in Islamic context brings out its unique character in the development of human personality vis-a-vis the social order. While making the individual and his inner self, its major focus, the Qur'an addresses him to illustrates his perfect and best fashioning by God and the former is prone to imbibe the 'guidance' of the Latter. The Qur'an refers to it at various places by calling it a 'new creation' into which 'Divine Spirit' is breathed that distinguishes him from the other creation of the universe in terms of nature and role. This underscores the spiritual as well as the corporeal, the transcendental and the phenomenal nature of man and in its spirituality is of central significance. In fact it is this spirituality and morality expressed

through the traits of God-consciousness (*taqwa*) and self-consciousness (*marifat al-nafs*) of man that leads to the growth of one's personality development in a proper and just way. Even the innate consciousness of 'evil' and 'good' in the self (*nafs*) signifies the distinguished nature of it wherein choice following the either is granted. It is this free will of man by which he selects his direction of life either towards evil (*fujur*) or towards good (*taqwa*) and it is latter in which lies the success (*falah*) of man. His *qalb*, too, marks the significant role by acting as a super-sensory faculty to access the Reality (spiritual and phenomenal) properly so that adaptation of it to the human activities may not become on false lines.

References and Notes

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- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.130.
- ⁵ Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, (tr.). Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R. T. Ross, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1967.Vol.1.p.190, cited in *Qur'anic Concept of Human Psyche*, ed. Zafar Afaq Ansari, The International Institute of Islamic Thought, Islamabad Lahore, Pakistan, 1992 p.18
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Cf. Peter Straton and Nicky Hayes, *Dictionary of Psychology*, Universal Book Stall, New Delhi, 1991, pp.150.
- ⁸ Prof. Arun Kumar Singh, *The Comprehensive History of Psychology*, Motilal Banarasdas Publication, Delhi, 2006, p. 316.
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- ¹⁰ Prof. Arun Kumar Singh, op.cit.131.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² The Qur'an, 23:12:14.
- ¹³ Cf. Ibid7:2
- ¹⁴ Vide Zafar Afaq Ansari, op.cot.p.28.
- ¹⁵ The Qur'an, 95:4.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.,15:28-29.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, Dar al-Andalus, Gibraltar, 19-80 p.393.
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- ²² Fazlur Rehman, "Ibn Sina" in *A History of Muslim Philosophy* Vol. I Edited by M.M. Sharif, Royal Book Company, Karachi, 2013,p.489. See also Seyyed Hussein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Caravan Book, New York 1976,p.40.
- ²³ Zafar Afaq Ansari, ed.op.cit.p.41.
- ²⁴ Ibid 42.

²⁵Ibid. pp.42-43 See also Prof. M. Umarruddin in *The Ethical Philosophy of Al Ghazzali*, Institute of Islamic Culture Lahore, Pakistan, 1988 pp.59-64.

²⁶Ibid.43.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸S.M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Kitab Bawan, Delhi 19.p.108.

²⁹Allama Iqbal, *Kuliyat-i-Iqbal*, (Persian) Tehran p.488.

³⁰The Qur'an 91:7-9

³¹Ibid.90:8-10.

³²Maulana Sayyid Abul 'Ala Maududi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an* translated by Zafar Ishaq Ansari, Markazi Maktaba Delhi, part 6th.p. 352.

³³Muhammad Asad, op.cit,p.945.

³⁴Ibid.12:53.

³⁵The Qur'an 75:2.

³⁶Ibid. 12:53.

³⁷Ibid. 89:27.

³⁸See Zafar Afaq Anasari, ed.op.cit.p 49.

³⁹The Qur'an, 7:179.

⁴⁰Ibid.22:46.