Inanimate Observer

Without a self to know it, there is no world. Other people, living and dead, other worlds, observed and imagined are only because of the selves that know them. Existence is not the purpose of the self. The opposite is true: existence is from and with the self. In the Recitation, God says: “God created the heavens and the earth in truth that each self be awarded after its deserts. No wrong shall be done them.”¹

This verse makes clear that the heavens and the earth and their creation in truth are for the self that comes to confess no self but the Self. For every self to fulfil this purpose – and God said all things pass except His face² – they must be one. This is because there cannot be two absolute perfections. Thus, all human hearts are as one between the two fingers of the All-merciful.³

Otherwise, we would have to kill the self, which is possible only in imagination. “Man’s claim to being the centre of the universe has lost its foundation,” wrote Ernst Cassirer. “Man is placed in an infinite space in which his being seems to be a single and vanishing point. He is surrounded by a mute universe, by a world that is silent to his religious feelings and to his deepest moral demands.”⁴

But who is making this assertion? Clearly no inanimate observer, but a living one, an observing self, speaking of something inanimate as “a single and vanishing point,” a point that living self has imagined, a point within the self as its centre. How can death be absolute certainty, if “the now” is too? Conversely, how can the “now” be absolute certainty, if death is too? There cannot be two absolute certainties. Consequently, that both death and “now” are certainties is an enigma to be resolved within the self, which constantly accompanies it.

Life is our only reality. Death is insoluble in the terms of quantity. The more obsessive our desire to know the quantifiable as the only world, the greater our need to turn away from death. We cannot answer the question of life beyond death without myth, as Cassirer saw clearly: “In a certain sense the whole of mythical thought may be interpreted as a constant and obstinate negation of

¹ Qur’an, 45:22.
² See Qur’an, 28:88.
³ See Muslim, 4:1397.
the phenomenon of death. By virtue of this conviction of the unbroken unity and continuity of life myth has to clear away this phenomenon.⁵

Since without a self to know it, nothing exists, the world is knower-knowledge-known. Without this differentiated structure, there is neither knowledge nor knower. Whatever we can know in the quantifiable world confirms its bounds and therefore what lies beyond them. This duality of visible and invisible affirms Unity as its principle. Can Unity be known in differentiation into knower-knowledge-known?

If Unity is what binds knowers with knowledge, then we must see It as without duality. We are not some other Unity, we are Its manifestation, as is the world to which we relate through knowledge. Since we are in Unity’s image, we know the world and ourselves as images of Unity. The closer we are to It, the more clearly our knowledge is the image of an image. Perfect knowledge would be to know ourselves as clear images of our Lord.

Here, the individual “I” and God’s “I” resemble reality and its image in a mirror. The image has only the original’s reality. As images, we have life, will, power, knowledge, speech, hearing and sight, received from our Original. All the image has of its own is death. It can thus be said that Unity bestows existence and is present in and absent from all things: present, because everything manifests its inexhaustible possibilities, absent since they remain an image of the ur-model of Unity.

We are living, willing, powerful, knowing, speaking, hearing and seeing creatures – all received qualities. They are originally God’s, Whom we manifest through them. We receive them as a debt. We know them fully only when face to face with God. His face is always facing us, All-knowing. We as His image are never Him. Since death is simply what remains once we cease to be His image, now or in the hour or in death itself, all we have is what we have received. In no “now” have we anything but death and the self, which receives everything from God.

As images, what we have is from God, but limited. The Giver descends towards the recipient, the recipient ascends towards the Giver. This reciprocity is reflected in the confession of no god but God and the Praised as His apostle. The first part denies that any image can be the same as God, but also that there is anything not received from Him. The second contains the original and perfect image God made manifest as the Praised in an image that receives all it has as praise and so is praised. He is Universal Humanity, that encompasses all things. Created, he is an apostle of God’s love to be known, the seal of perfect

⁵ Ibid., 84.