

Khudi as Conative Selfhood: Iqbal's Philosophy of Volitional Agency and Its Relevance for Psychological Science

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Abstract

Modern psychology has thoroughly elaborated cognition and affect but has struggled to articulate a coherent account of *conation*, the volitional system governing initiation, effort, persistence, and sustained agency. Although early theorists identified conation as the third pillar of the mind, the construct has been redistributed across motivation science, self-regulation, executive function, grit, and agency research, with no unifying core. Building on contemporary efforts to recover conation as an integrative construct, this paper uses the term *Conativism* as a synthetic label for a coordinated four-component model of volitional initiation, effort mobilization, persistence under resistance, and goal recommitment and adjustment. The central thesis is not that Allama Muhammad Iqbal's philosophy of *khudi* is reducible to conation, but that *khudi* contains a conative architecture: a theory of selfhood organized around the initiation, mobilization, persistence, and recommitment of purposive action under a transcendent moral horizon. Using an integrative theoretical review of Iqbal's prose, selected canonical verses, and the secondary literature on *khudi*, the paper maps Iqbal's concepts (*talab*, *ishq*, *junun*, *yaqin*, *faqr*, *amal*) onto the four conative components, then identifies what Iqbal adds that empirical psychology cannot adjudicate from its own methods: normative directionality, transcendent telos, qualitative differentiation between *khudi* and the lower *nafs al-ammara*, and an integrated spirituality of action. Illustrative implications for education, leadership formation, and clinical practice are outlined.

Keywords: Iqbal, *khudi*, conation, Conativism, Islamic psychology, volition, *nafs*, self-development

Introduction

Contemporary psychological science exhibits an unusual asymmetry. The domains of cognition and affect have been extensively theorized and operationalized in models of human functioning, built out into full research programs, and have dedicated journals, standard instruments, textbook chapters, and a community of researchers who take responsibility for the construct as such. Conation, the third piece of Hilgard's trilogy of mind and the faculty governing will, striving, and purposive action, has quietly disappeared from mainstream discourse (Hilgard, 1980; Mayer et al., 1997; Reitan & Wolfson, 2000). Its disappearance was not due to empirical refutation; rather, aspects of conation became distributed across partially overlapping literatures on motivation, self-regulation, executive function, grit, and agency. The resulting literature elaborates on constructs relevant to purposive action, but they are often viewed through distinct theoretical traditions rather than as components of a single functional construct of how intentions become sustained action under resistance (Rhodes & de Bruijn, 2013).

The gap, however, is two-sided. Iqbal scholarship has long treated *khudi* through metaphysical, theological, educational, political, and aesthetic lenses (Saiyidain, 1965; Schimmel, 1963; Vahid, 1959), but has not sufficiently articulated its functional psychological-conative structure. On the other hand, psychology has studied agency, motivation, and self-regulation but lacks a normatively rich account of volitional formation. Each tradition possesses what the other lacks (Madeira & Águas, 2026). The present paper argues that bringing them into disciplined dialogue is productive for both.

Conativism is referred to in this paper as a generic label for a framework that organizes existing literatures on volition into a coordinated functional system, consisting of four components:

1. Volitional initiation
2. Effort mobilization,
3. Persistence under resistance, and
4. Goal recommitment and adjustment.

The label is a working synthesis rather than a citation to an established school; the components are derived from work on action control (Kuhl, 2000), implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999), self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1998), grit and persistence (Lam & Zhou, 2025), self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Howard et al., 2026), and agency (Bandura, 2001). While each explains a portion of the conative landscape, none has accepted responsibility for theorizing it as

an integrated whole. *Conativism* aims to name the integrative framework (Reitan & Wolfson, 2000).

With this understanding, conativism explains how people keep working toward their goals, but not which goals are worth the effort, beyond what measured results happen to show. This is where Eastern philosophy, especially the work of Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), has a great deal to offer. Throughout his poetry and prose, Iqbal returns again and again to the self as a source of human will. His central idea, *khudi*, is not a fixed essence waiting to be found. It is a living capacity that grows through focused effort, deep commitment, and steady struggle against obstacles.

This paper does not argue that *khudi* can be reduced to conation. Iqbal's idea reaches into metaphysics, theology, poetry, and the life of whole civilizations, and no single psychological category can capture all of it (De Diego González, 2023; Schimmel, 1963). Rather, the claim is that *khudi* has a conative structure at its core. It is a theory of the self built around how we engage in action toward a purpose, gather our energy, maintain steadfastness, and recommit when we falter, all guided by a higher moral aim. Conativism is used as a lens that brings this structure into focus, without pretending the lens captures everything. The point is not that Iqbal predicted modern research on conation. It is that Iqbal offers a rich moral and spiritual account of human will, something modern psychology fails to provide and, given its methods and commitments, perhaps cannot (Prilleltensky, 1997).

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The first aim of this project is to explore how the four core parts of the conative system (volitional initiation, effort mobilization, persistence under resistance, goal recommitment) relate to Iqbal's key ideas from his philosophy and poetry (*talab*, *ishq* and *junun*, *yaqin* and *faqr*, and the unfinished *khudi*), while noting where Iqbal goes beyond the framework. The second is to show what Iqbal adds to a psychological version of Conativism: a sense of moral direction, a higher ultimate purpose, a clear distinction between *khudi* and the lower self (*nafs*), and a spirituality lived out through action. The third is to consider the practical implications of an Iqbal-informed Conativism in the areas of education, leadership formation, and clinical practice.

These aims lead to three research questions: How does *khudi* map onto the functional components of the conative theory, and where does it exceed them? What does Iqbal's philosophy

offer that empirical psychology cannot due to the limits of its own methods? And how might this integration help in education, leadership, and clinical practice?

Methodology

This paper is an integrative theoretical review, pulling together existing literature to build new theoretical frameworks (Cronin & George, 2023). It does not conduct primary-text hermeneutic or philological analysis of Iqbal's corpus and makes no claim to systematic engagement with the original Urdu or Persian. The aim is to synthesize two existing literatures, contemporary research on conation and the established scholarly literature on Iqbal's concept of *khudi*, into a coordinated framework whose elements illuminate one another.

The treatment of *khudi* draws on three sources: (a) the established secondary scholarship on Iqbal's philosophy of selfhood (Nicholson, 1920; Saiyidain, 1965; Vahid, 1959); (b) Iqbal's own English-language exposition in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930/2021), engaged directly; and (c) canonical Iqbalian verses that function as foundational reference points in the wider Muslim intellectual tradition and whose interpretations are extensively rehearsed in the secondary scholarship. Verses are introduced as well-established reference points rather than as products of systematic primary-text analysis.

The contemporary side draws on published work in action control (Kuhl, 2000), implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999), self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1998), grit (Duckworth et al., 2007), self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and agency (Bandura, 2001). The four-component framework labeled *Conativism* is offered as a working synthesis rather than a citation to an established school (see below).

The two literatures were placed in dialogue through conceptual analysis: identification of structural correspondences between the four functional components of the conative framework and the Iqbalian concepts that organize *khudi* (*talab*, *ishq*, *junun*, *yaqin*, *faqr*, *amal*). Where correspondences support the integration, they are articulated. Where Iqbalian concepts exceed the conative components, the excess is preserved as a candidate for theoretical extension rather than reduced to the framework (see below). Sustained philological treatment of the original Urdu and Persian is acknowledged as a limitation and identified as a priority for future research. Working translations of verses are marked "(author's translation)"; renderings from Nicholson or other established translators are attributed accordingly.

Theoretical Background

The Trilogy of Mind and the Decline of Conation

Classical psychology divided human mental functioning into three components: cognition, which helps us understand the world; affect, which tells us what matters; and conation, which drives us to start acting and keep going (Bain, 1855/1977; Hilgard, 1980; Mayer et al., 1997). In this view, conation was more than motivation. It was the ability to act on motivation over time, even when under resistance. Early thinkers saw conation as essential to understanding how people act, build character, and grow morally.

The twentieth-century rise of behaviorism and the subsequent cognitive revolution reorganized psychological discourse around operationally tractable constructs (Khan, 2025). Cognition could be modeled computationally; affect could be indexed physiologically and behaviorally. Conation, by contrast, was perceived as conceptually diffuse and methodologically resistant to standardization. It did not survive the methodological transition as an explicit construct.

Yet the phenomena conation was meant to capture did not disappear. They were redistributed. Motivation science took up goal valuation (Uusberg et al., 2019); self-regulation research took up discrepancy reduction and inhibitory control (Baumeister et al., 2007; Carver & Scheier, 1998); executive function research took up working memory and cognitive control (Miyake et al., 2000); personality psychology took up persistence as a stable trait (Duckworth et al., 2007); and agency research took up perceived authorship and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Of particular relevance is the European action-control tradition. Heckhausen and Gollwitzer (1987) distinguished motivational from volitional phases of action; Kuhl (2000) developed this into a functional-design account of self-regulation that explicitly recovers volitional constructs; Gollwitzer (1999) demonstrated empirically that implementation intentions bridge the intention–action gap. Recent integrative efforts (Mayer et al., 1997; Reitan & Wolfson, 2000) have begun to recover conation as a coordinated construct, though no single framework has yet gained widespread acceptance. Each subfield illuminates a portion of the conative landscape, but none has accepted responsibility for theorizing it as an integrated whole.

Conativism as Synthetic Framework

Conativism, as used in this paper, is a label for an integrative framework that brings together the fragmented concepts into a coordinated functional model. The term does not refer to an established school but proposes a working term for the integrative ambition the cited literatures collectively imply. Conation, therefore, is defined as the psychological system responsible for initiating, sustaining, and regulating goal-directed behavior over time, particularly under conditions of effort, cost, uncertainty, or resistance; that is, conation is temporally extended and condition-dependent, becoming most salient when behavior cannot be sustained through automaticity, positive affect, or environmental scaffolding alone.

This proposed framework specifies four core components. *Volitional initiation* is the moment an intention is converted into action, the point where effort begins. *Effort mobilization* is gathering and adjustment of mental, emotional, and physical resources while during engagement. *Persistence under resistance* is the capacity to continue action despite inner (fatigue, boredom, distress) or outer (obstacles, setbacks) struggles. *Goal recommitment and adjustment* is recovering after lapse, modification in approach, and selective disengagement for maladaptive aims. Conative strength is not assessed through maximal capacity in one aspect. Rather, it is the effective coordination across components over time.

Notably, Conativism is empirically productive but normatively thin. It explains mechanisms underlying pursuit of goals without specifying which goals are worth pursuing. That restraint makes sense for empirical psychology, but it leaves a gap. A philosophy that sees the life of the will as both a process and a destiny could fill that gap in a way that empirical Conativism, which only describes and stays neutral across values, cannot do alone. Iqbal offers precisely such philosophy.

Islamic Ontology: Khudi and the Registers of Nafs

Before turning to Iqbal directly, it is necessary to clarify the Islamic ontological terms in which *khudi* operates. The Qur'an describes the *nafs* (self/soul) in multiple registers. Three are most commonly distinguished. The *nafs al-ammarah bi al-su'* (commanding self) names the self captured by appetite, vanity, and self-enclosure, prone to commanding the person toward heedlessness (Q. 12:53). The *nafs al-lawwamah* (reproaching self) names the self that has acquired moral awareness and reproaches itself for its lapses (Q. 75:2). The *nafs al-mutma'innah* (tranquil

self) names the self at rest in Divine remembrance and reality (Q. 89:27). Although some scholars have developed further gradations within and beyond these (Khan & Nisa, 2024), the threefold scheme is sufficient for the present analysis.

Khudi in Iqbal's usage is not a replacement for this ontology but operates alongside it. *Khudi* names specifically the dynamic principle of individuated agency that develops through directed striving, i.e. the register of the self in which volitional formation occurs. The qualitative distinction that will become important later, between elevated conation grounded in *khudi* and dissipated or disordered conation driven by the lower *nafs al-ammara*, is therefore not a distinction between "good" and "evil" selves but between integrated and disintegrated configurations of the same agentic capacity.

Iqbal's Project and Existing Interpretations of Khudi

Iqbal's philosophy is essentially a philosophy of the active, striving self. From the early *Asrar-i-Khudi* through the *Reconstruction*, Iqbal is preoccupied with a single question: what is the structure and destiny of the self that acts, that wills, that strives? His answer, *khudi*, has been read in multiple ways. While some have emphasized the metaphysical and Sufi-philosophical genealogy of the concept, others read *khudi* through its religious, aesthetic, and theological registers (Khan & Malik, 2021; Schimmel, 1963; Vahid, 1959). Subsequent scholarship has also framed *khudi* as anti-colonial subjectivity, dynamic personality, Qur'anic vicegerency, spiritual individuation, and Nietzschean/Fichtean selfhood transformed by Islam.

The present paper proposes that the *conative reading* of Iqbal's thoughts can identify the functional psychological architecture present underneath. The metaphysical, the religious, the pedagogical, and the anti-colonial readings of *khudi* are not in opposition of one another. Rather, each identifies a dimension of a concept whose internal architecture may be considered conative. In other words, reading *khudi* conatively does not diminish its other dimensions but helps to identify the underlying form that allows it to operate across them.

Three aspects of Iqbal's thought may point towards its conative nature. First is the metaphysical superiority of the self, where reality is perceived not as a system of static essences but a community of striving selves whose interactions constitute the real. Second, the emphasis of action over contemplation, where the test of being is what a person sustains, struggles for, and becomes through effort. Third, the dynamic ontology of *khudi*, where the self is not a state or a

possession but a progressively intense process of struggle in the face of resistance. As Iqbal puts it in the *Reconstruction*, “The end of the ego’s quest is not emancipation from the limitations of individuality; it is, on the other hand, a more precise definition of it” (Iqbal, 1930/2021, p. 156).

Crucially, Iqbal also articulates a developmental trajectory for *khudi*. In *Asrar-i-Khudi* he identifies three stages through which the self moves: *ita’at* (obedience to the law, as discipline of the still-undisciplined will), *zabt-i-nafs* (self-mastery, the highest form of self-consciousness), and *niyabat-i-ilahi* (Divine vicegerency, the realization of the self as agent under the Real) (Khan & Malik, 2021). This developmental architecture, I believe, is itself a conative theory of formation. It appears to specify how volitional capacity is built through disciplined obedience that scaffolds self-mastery, which in turn opens onto genuine vicegerent agency. It is no accident that this trajectory parallels in structure (though not in content) what developmental and clinical research now identifies as the scaffolding of conative capacities from external regulation toward autonomous, value-consistent action. Independent support for reading this trajectory as a formation sequence comes from grounded-theory work on Iqbal’s account of learning, which derives a staged learning cycle inductively from his corpus (Murad, 2024). That a comparable stage structure emerges from a data-driven analysis conducted without reference to the conative literature suggests the architecture is in the texts rather than imposed by the lens I bring to them.

Conative Currents in European Thought: What Iqbal Took and Transformed

The genius of Iqbal’s thought is that his philosophical thought not emerge in isolation from modernity. In his *Reconstruction*, Iqbal continuously engages with thinkers, like Bergson and Nietzsche. The conative significance is not in what Iqbal borrows but in what he selectively appropriates and transforms through a grounded Islamic lens.

From Bergson, Iqbal agrees that duration and life’s endless creativity are central, and with Bergson’s critique of intellect for turning dynamic reality into static categories. But Iqbal rejects Bergson’s idea that God is “pure duration” (Iqbal, 1930/2021, Lecture II). For Iqbal, an impersonal life force cannot address the self, and being addressed is what makes the self. This changes the nature of striving. In Bergson, the durational self strives but is not summoned; in Iqbal, the striving self is constituted by being summoned. *Talab* therefore needs more than duration; it also necessitates a *Someone* toward whom the striving is directed (i.e. the object of striving).

From Nietzsche, Iqbal takes the critique of life-denying spiritualities and the centrality of will as the principle of self-formation (Iqbal, 1930/2021). But the *Übermensch* is rejected on conative grounds: untethered from any horizon higher than the self, the Nietzschean will is structurally unstable where its intensity cannot be sustained because it can only refer back to the self that wills. The *Mard-i-Mu'min* preserves the energy of will while structuring it through submission to a Real higher than itself; what would otherwise dissipate as self-aggrandizement is gathered into vicegerency (Khan & Sattar, 2023).

The conative architecture of *khudi* thus integrates rather than imports these currents. Bergson contributes duration without personality and Nietzsche contributes will without telos. Iqbal gathers these under the Qur'anic concept of vicegerency, producing a conative philosophy in which duration is personal, will is teleologically structured, and activity is constituted by address.

Findings: Mapping Khudi onto the Conative System

This section presents the central findings of the conceptual mapping. Each of the four conative components is presented alongside the corresponding Iqbalian concept(s), with textual anchors from both the poetry and the prose lectures. Table 1 summarizes the mapping. Section 5.5 specifies its limits.

Table 1

Mapping of Conative Components onto Iqbal's Concepts, with Distinctive Contributions

Conative Component	Iqbalian Concept(s)	Distinctive Contribution Beyond Empirical Conation
Volitional initiation	Talab / tamanna (yearning, restless desire)	Reframes initiation from episodic action-starting into a habituated existential restlessness toward higher becoming.
Effort mobilization	Ishq / junun (love, productive intensity)	Treats effort not as resource expenditure but as love-charged generative capacity whose magnitude is itself variable.
Persistence under resistance	Yaqin / faqr (lived certitude, dynamic disencumberment)	Grounds perseverance in conviction and structural freedom from competing attachments; reframes resistance as constitutive of ascent.
Goal recommitment and adjustment	Unfinished khudi / amal-i-paiham (ceaseless action)	Reframes recommitment as the normal rhythm of selfhood under a transcendent moral horizon, not a remedial response to failure.

Volitional Initiation and Talab

The first conative component, volitional initiation, explains the capacity to convert intention into action at the threshold where effort is required. This initiation deficit often appears when motivation is intact, yet action fails to begin. This phenomenon is poorly explained by motivational weakness alone (Gollwitzer, 1999).

Iqbal's concept of *talab* (yearning, seeking, restless desire) relates well to volitional initiation, but with an important elaboration. Per Iqbal, the self lives through the intensity of desire, and the withdrawal of desire is the dissolution of selfhood itself. As Nicholson renders one of Iqbal's central formulations: "Life is preserved by purpose: because of the goal its caravan-bell tinkles. Life is latent in seeking, its origin is hidden in desire" (Iqbal, 1915/1920). In his *Reconstruction*, Iqbal addressed this philosophically by stating that the ego is "directive energy... formed and disciplined by its own experience" (Iqbal, 1930/2021, p. 82), whose essential character is to shape the world rather than be passively shaped by it. *The Reconstruction's* account of the ego as directive energy gives philosophical form to what the poetry renders as *talab*. In both, the claim is that a self that directs itself toward nothing beyond itself is not merely a weak self; it is not properly a self at all. The *Bal-i-Jibril* couplet often quoted as inspirational verse formalizes the position:

ستاروں سے آگے جہاں اور بھی ہیں
ابھی عشق کے امتحاں اور بھی ہیں

(Iqbal, 2024, p.393)

Beyond the stars there are yet more worlds;

the trials of love are still not over.

The structural form of this couplet is what makes it specifically a statement of *talab* rather than of aspiration, transcendence, or ambition in general. The couplet describes not a goal but the structure of having goals. The *khudi* that has arrived anywhere is already called toward what lies beyond; arrival itself reactivates pursuit. In conative terms, Iqbal locates volitional initiation not as a faculty that is exercised at specific moments of decision, but as a continuous quality of being. Where contemporary psychology asks how to overcome action paralysis, Iqbal asks how to cultivate a self for whom paralysis is foreign.

This reframing, in my opinion, has clinical and educational significance. If volitional initiation is taught as a skill of getting started, the intervention is reactive and simply a remedy for episodes of inactivity. If initiation is cultivated as a habituated restlessness in the direction of meaningful pursuit, the intervention becomes more formative and useful. Moreover, since cultivation of *talab* is a developmental process (Saiyidain, 1965), it becomes more beneficial over the long term than current intervention models typically presume.

Effort Mobilization and *Ishq*

The second component, effort mobilization, relates to the allotment and continued maintenance of cognitive, affective, and physiological energies during engagement. Contemporary effort theories typically explain effort as a cost evaluated against expected reward (Kool & Botvinick, 2014). The conative framework treats effort mobilization as an active regulatory function whose magnitude must be repeatedly allocated and recalibrated.

Iqbal's elaboration of *ishq* (love) and *junun* (passion, productive madness) offers a philosophically richer account. *Asrar-i-Khudi* maps love as the strengthening principle of *khudi*: love hardens, intensifies, and individuates the self. "The luminous point whose name is the Self," Iqbal writes, "is the life-spark beneath our dust. By Love it is made more lasting, more living, more burning, more glowing" (Iqbal, 1915/1920). The claim is functional, rather than conceptual: love is what allows the self to *mobilize* itself. In *Bal-i-Jibril*, the same point appears in the language of cost:

نقش ہیں سب ناتمام خون جگر کے بغیر
نغمہ ہے سودائے خام خون جگر کے بغیر

(Iqbal, 2024, p.425)

All designs remain incomplete without the heart's blood;

song is mere raw fancy without the heart's blood.

The Persian-Urdu idiom *khoon-i-jigar* (heart's blood) names precisely what effort-mobilization research has been attempting to model: the costly, sustained, recalibrated commitment of inner resources to a goal pursuit. Iqbal's position is that no design (*naqsh*) reaches completion without this costly mobilization, and that the *quality* of the resulting work is a function of the *quality* of

the mobilized effort. Islam also emphasizes intention and striving towards the intended goal, rather than the result itself. The *Reconstruction* supports the poetic claim philosophically where personality, for Iqbal, is a state of tension, and the higher the tension the more individuated the ego. *Ishq* identifies the kind of tension that strengthens rather than disintegrates the self as the strain of complete absorption in a worthy object.

Critically, Iqbal distinguishes *ishq* from mere intensity. *Junun*, productive madness, is *ishq* under the discipline of direction. Without direction, intensity can turn into dissipation; without intensity, direction can turn into routine. While contemporary conative theory has begun to model the coordination of effort and goal-pursuit (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998), it has not generally theorized the *ignition* of mobilization—the question of what makes effort possible in the first place. Iqbal seems to suggest that effort mobilization is inadequately understood as the management of a finite resource; it is more accurately understood as the channeling of a generative capacity whose magnitude is itself variable as a function of love. This has direct intervention implications where depth interventions on *what* one loves may yield greater sustained effort than surface interventions on *how* one allocates.

Persistence Under Resistance: *Yaqin* and *Faqr*

The third component, persistence under resistance, concerns the capacity to continue acting in the presence of internal or external impediments. Trait-based accounts of persistence describe stable individual differences (Duckworth et al., 2007) but provide limited insight into the regulatory processes that sustain action moment by moment. The conative framework treats persistence as an emergent property of ongoing regulatory coordination.

Iqbal's pairing of *yaqin* (firm certitude) and *faqr* (dynamic spiritual poverty) offers a well-articulated concept of persistence. In the *Asrar-i-Khudi*, Iqbal develops the philosophical claim that the ego attains to freedom by the removal of all obstructions in its way; the ego is partly free, partly determined, and reaches fuller freedom by approaching the Individual who is most free (God). Persistence, on this account, is not the act of an already-complete freedom but the activity itself through which freedom is progressively realized; each act of persistence under resistance enacts the ego's approach to its source. *Yaqin*, for Iqbal, is not propositional certainty but lived conviction, the unshakable orientation toward what one knows by participation/action rather than by inference. *Faqr* is its outcome: the disconnection of the self from competing attachments that

would compromise the principal pursuit. The famous couplet from *Bal-i-Jibril* compresses the architecture into two lines:

یقین محکم عمل پیہم محبت فاتح عالم
جہاد زندگانی میں ہیں یہ مردوں کی شمشیریں

(Iqbal, 2024, p.302)

Firm certitude, ceaseless action, all-conquering love
these are the swords of men in the struggle of life.

The three qualities mentioned in this couplet are identical to the conative architecture of sustained action: certitude grounds direction (the *that* of pursuit), action operationalizes engagement (the *doing* of pursuit), and love sustains motivation against resistance (the *enduring* of pursuit). Iqbal's metaphor of *jihad-i-zindagani*, the struggle that is constitutive of life, flips the contemporary idea that persistence is only reserved for difficult moments. For Iqbal, life is the difficulty; persistence is not a response to occasional resistance but the very form of living.

Faqr completes the picture where the persistent self is the unburdened self. *Faqr* is not poverty due to deprivation but poverty as freedom where the individual is free from secondary attachments that degenerate the primary pursuit. In conative terms, *faqr* is the structural elimination of competing motivational pulls; it is what allows persistence to be possible at all, because it removes the perpetual cost of decisional renegotiation.

Goal Recommitment and the Unfinished Khudi

The fourth component, goal recommitment and adjustment, relates to adaptive recovery of agency after disruption. In reality, sustained action is rarely linear because lapses, failures, and competing demands require recalibration. Models of self-regulation address this component but typically frame recommitment as a corrective response to deviation from a set point (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

Iqbal takes a radical approach. For Iqbal, the *khudi* is essentially unfinished. Recommitment is not a corrective response to occasional lapse but the ongoing structure of selfhood. In the *Reconstruction*, Iqbal writes that the self “moves from the centre outwards. It has, so to speak, two sides which may be described as appreciative and efficient” (Iqbal, 1930/2021, p.

38). The self is always at one stage (*maqam*), always called toward the next. Iqbal's formulation in the *Reconstruction* makes the structural point explicit: "every act of a free ego creates a new situation, and thus offers further opportunities of creative unfolding" (Iqbal, 1930/2021, p. 98). The same structure is compressed into a single Urdu couplet:

ہر اک مقام سے آگے مقام ہے تیرا
حیات ذوق سفر کے سوا کچھ اور نہیں

(Iqbal, 2024, p.382)

Beyond every station lies a further station of yours;

life is nothing but the relish of the journey. (author's translation)

The couplet does two things at once. It denies that any station (*maqam*) is terminal since every attainment is repositioned, in the moment of attainment, as a point of departure. And it relocates the value of pursuit from its endpoint to the pursuing itself. In other words, if life is designed to enjoy the journey (*zauq-e-safar*), what sustains action is not the anticipated arrival but a cultivated taste for the movement. In conative terms, this is a claim about recommitment; a self whose satisfaction lies in the journey does not experience the exhaustion of one goal as the exhaustion of motivation, because the capacity that drives pursuit is renewed by pursuing rather than consumed by it. The ego does not arrive at itself through introspection but constructs itself through the act and the act is never singular because the continuity of the ego is precisely its capacity to resume after each dissolution.

Two implications follow here. First, the framing removes the implicit unhealthy shame that attaches to recommitment in many psychological accounts. If recommitment is the form of selfhood rather than a remedial response to failure, then it is not a sign of weakness but the very act of growth. Second, conation is not merely instrumental to the achievement of fixed goals but constitutive of the self that pursues them. The pursued goal changes the pursuer; the unfinished *khudi* is, by Iqbal's account, the only self there is. The famous Iqbal's couplet expresses this most directly:

خودی کو کر بلند اتنا کہ ہر تقدیر سے پہلے
خدا بندے سے خود پوچھے بتا تیری رضا کیا ہے

(Iqbal, 2024, p.388)

Elevate your selfhood so high that before every decree,
God Himself asks the servant: 'Tell Me, what is your wish?'

Kar buland, or make high, raise, names the active, recursive nature of the work. The *khudi* is not given but constructed, and the construction is unending. There is no altitude at which the imperative to raise lapses. Recommitment is not a recovery from lapse but the perpetual condition of the volitional life.

Limits of the Mapping

Humanistic and philosophical concepts rarely align symmetrically with psychological categories, and the present mapping needs to be understood with caution. *Talab* is not just volitional initiation because it also carries existential longing, metaphysical incompleteness, and the Sufi concept of *muhabbat* directed toward the Real. *Ishq* is not merely effort mobilization because it is ontological, ethical, and theological—the principle by which selves and worlds are constituted in relation. *Faqr* is not merely freedom from competing attachments because it is a prophetic-spiritual station carrying the dignity of the strong servant of God. And the unfinished *khudi* is not merely goal recommitment because it is a metaphysical account of selfhood under Divine address.

The mapping should be considered *heuristic* rather than as an equivalence. Conativism functions as a lens that brings the conative architecture of Iqbal's thought into clearer view. What exceeds the lens is preserved rather than reduced. It is precisely where Iqbal's concepts exceed the conative components that his framework can extend, qualify, and enrich contemporary psychological theory rather than merely confirming it.

Discussion: What Iqbal Adds to Conativism

The mapping above establishes a robust structural correspondence between Iqbal's philosophy and the contemporary conative framework. The structural correspondence is not, however, the most important finding. The more important contribution lies in what Iqbal's

framework adds that empirical Conativism, insofar as it remains methodologically descriptive and pluralistic, cannot by itself adjudicate. Four such contributions are particularly significant.

Normative Directionality

Conativism, by methodological commitment, offers only a thin account of the goals toward which conation should be directed. It theorizes mechanisms of sustained pursuit without prescribing what is worth pursuing. This restraint is appropriate to empirical psychology, but it leaves the framework practically incomplete. Some of the same regulatory capacities that sustain disciplined striving can also be enlisted in maladaptive patterns when organized around disordered aims, compulsive reinforcement loops, or socially destructive goals. (Compulsion and impaired agency are properly distinguished from conation; the point here is not that addiction is “strong conation”, but that conative capacity considered in abstraction from worthy ends does not yield human flourishing.)

Khudi, for Iqbal, contains the capacity oriented toward becoming worthy of being. The *khudi* that intensifies through unworthy pursuits is not intensifying at all and may be dissipating under a misleading name. Conative capacity directed at unworthy ends is structurally unstable, because such ends cannot sustain the depth of *ishq* on which long-term persistence depends. Empirical research on goal contents lends partial support (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998), finding that intrinsic goals related to meaning, growth, and contribution produce more sustainable functioning than extrinsic goals related to wealth, image, and status.

Transcendent Telos

Iqbal’s framework articulates *khudi* as oriented not merely toward proximate goals but toward a transcendent objective (i.e. the realization of human vicegerency (*khilafa*)) under the gaze of the Real. For Iqbal, this is not optional because the *khudi* that is not oriented as such is structurally incomplete and is striving without a horizon appropriate to its scale.

Whatever one makes of the metaphysics, the functional point is that conation extended toward an infinite horizon has different dynamics from conation extended toward finite goals. A finite goal, once achieved, may leave the self in stagnation whereas the infinite horizon never leaves it disengaged. Therefore, Iqbal’s thought offers a response to the problem of post-achievement disengagement that contemporary psychology has documented but not theoretically

resolved (Klinger, 1977). The transcendent telos is not a religious covering but a functional feature because it sustains the conative life through and beyond every particular success.

Qualitative Differentiation: Khudi and the Lower Nafs

Iqbal works within the Islamic psychology sketched above, in which *khudi* names the elevated, integrated, striving self, while the lower *nafs al-ammara* names the self captured by appetite, vanity, fear, and self-enclosure. Both of these are conatively active since they initiate, mobilize effort, persist, and recommit. They may not differ in the *quantity* of conation but in its *quality*. As noted in prior section, this is not a claim about the *nafs* as such (which Islamic psychology recognizes as capable of refinement, moral struggle, and tranquility) but specifically about the lower or disordered nafs.

The distinction between elevated *khudi*-grounded conation and dissipated *nafs al-ammara*-driven conation is largely absent from contemporary conative theory, which tends to treat conation as a quantitative capacity. Psychology assumes that more is better and Iqbal's framework challenges this assumption directly. The compulsive striver is not deficient in conation; if anything, they have an overactive regulatory system. The deficiency lies in the integration of conation with the higher orientations of the self. This means that certain clinical presentations may not require the augmentation of conative capacity but its reorientation.

Integrated Spirituality of Action

Iqbal articulates an integrated spirituality of action that resists the common bifurcation between contemplation and engagement. In *Iblis ki Majlis-i-Shura* (Devil's Conference), Iblis instructs his deputies to keep humankind "well absorbed in the thought and contemplation of God in pre-morning hours" to deepen their "monastic disposition," removing them from the productive transformation of the material world (Iqbal, 1938/2021). Iqbal may consider passive spirituality as a satanic ruse because it hinders the volitional capacities of the self from the world they were meant to elevate.

For Iqbal, spirituality is not opposed to action but rather, the *deepening* of action. *Ishq* is the engine of engagement with the world; *faqr* is the disentanglement from the materialistic world making deeper engagement possible. Contemplative resources that do not return to action may produce the affective signatures of growth without its necessary conative substance.

Theoretical Divergence: Ontological Asymmetries

While we have identified points at which Iqbal's thought enriches Conativism, intellectual honesty requires explicit acknowledgment of points at which his framework diverges from empirical psychology in ways that cannot be assimilated. First, Iqbal's account presupposes a personal Divine, a metaphysical commitment that empirical psychology neither requires nor adjudicates. Second, Iqbal's thought is eschatologically oriented whereas contemporary psychology operates within a finite, this-worldly horizon. Third, Iqbal's metaphysics treats reality as a community of striving selves whose ground is the Ultimate Ego; psychology operates without commitment to any particular metaphysical theory of selves.

These divergences are due to different methodological commitments. The Conativist reading of Iqbal proposed here is *partial* because it identifies what can be psychologically articulated of Iqbal's thought while leaving its theological and metaphysical commitments standing on their own terms. A complete account would require theological and philosophical engagement.

Implications

The following implications are theoretical and not specified intervention protocols. Each of these domains (education, leadership formation, and clinical practice) requires its own work.

Education and Self-Development

The cultivation of *khudi* was Iqbal's central educational concern (Saiyidain, 1965) where colonial system of education leads to producing cognitive accumulation without volitional formation. An Iqbal-informed approach would commit to the formation of *talab* (habituated restless inquiry), *ishq* (connection of material to what students can come to love), *yaqin* and *faqr* (conviction in commitments and freedom from competing attachments), and *amal-i-paiham* (sustained effort across long horizons). Specific practices may include long-form projects across semesters; mentoring that scaffolds love for the subject; explicit instruction in attentional regulation; cumulative assessments rewarding sustained effort. The novelty is in their unification under a framework articulating their common purpose.

Leadership Formation

Iqbal's articulation of *Mard-e-Momin*, *Mir-e-Karwan* (caravan-leader), and the *Shaheen* (eagle) provides a leadership framework contemporary management theory has merely begun to recover (Ellahi, 2025). Through conative reading, the Iqbalian leader is defined not by traits but by integrated conative functioning. The leader's *talab* invites others into pursuit; *ishq* mobilizes effort beyond the calculations of incentive; *yaqin* and *faqr* sustain pursuit through opposition; ceaseless recommitment models the unfinishedness of serious work. Leadership development informed by this framework allows for a slow and steady formative work whose payoffs accrue over time and whose effects are more grounded.

Clinical and Therapeutic Implications

Within clinical psychology, a conative framework offers a useful complementary formulation lens for presentations where functional impairment cannot be fully explained by affective or cognitive symptoms alone. Clinical disorders with initiation difficulty may be approached not only through mood and cognitive intervention but also through *talab*, operationalized as the gradual reactivation of meaningful pursuit through behavioral activation, values clarification, and spiritually congruent goal-setting. Moreover, clinical disorders characterized by effort collapse may benefit from work on *ishq*, the depth of engagement with what the person can become passionate about alongside conventional stress-reduction. Lastly, clinical disorders characterized by rigid persistence may benefit from work on goal recommitment that frees the self from continuation as identity.

A concrete operationalization may clarify what an Iqbal-informed conative module looks like in practice. Consider a client presenting with rigid perfectionism. A standard cognitive-behavioral formulation addresses dysfunctional standards and dichotomous thinking. An Iqbal-informed conative module could supplement this by working sequentially on four formulation questions: (a) which goal pursuit is the rigidity in service of, and is it actually one of the client's deep loves or a substituted proxy?; (b) is *yaqin* (firm settled certitude about what one is actually trying to do) present, or has anxiety-driven imitation of certitude taken its place?; (c) what would *faqr* look like in this case, not detachment, but disencumberment from competing commitments whose unconscious demand maintains the perfectionism?; (d) can goal recommitment be reframed as the rhythm of the unfinished *khudi* rather than as the failure that perfectionism fears? Each

question can be operationalized through existing clinical methods (motivational interviewing, values clarification, behavioral activation, cognitive defusion); the Iqbalian framing supplies the integrating formulation.

An important caution: these applications should be understood as *formulation-level possibilities* rather than validated treatment protocols. An Iqbal-informed conative module would need to be integrated with established evidence-based methods and empirically evaluated before being offered as a clinical intervention in its own right. Within Muslim mental health contexts, the integration of *khudi*-based work with conative intervention can be very beneficial. Islamic psychology models like the Traditional Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy (TIIP) frameworks have begun to articulate the integration of classical Islamic understanding of epistemology and ontology with clinical practice (Keshavarzi, et al., 2021); an Iqbal-informed module would extend these toward the volitional life specifically.

Limitations

First, the conceptual mapping in this paper is interpretive, and therefore does not confirm or imply empirical validation. Future work needs to test measurable differences in research and intervention. Secondly, Iqbal's thought is poetic and metaphysical, and not directly transferrable to contemporary psychology without risking a degree of flattening. Since no analysis can comprehensively cover Iqbal's poetic articulation, the present analysis has attempted to focus primarily where Iqbal's thought matches the conative framework. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, for an Iqbal studies readership, the analysis depends on selected translated passages and a limited subset of the corpus. Moreover, translation of mystical concepts like *khudi*, *ishq*, *faqr*, *talab*, and *yaqin* is always a challenge since their semantic ranges exceed English equivalents. In this paper, the Persian works are consulted only secondarily here, whereas in reality, Iqbal's Farsi texts deserve more sustained philological treatment, ideally by scholars with strong grounding in both Urdu and Persian.

Future Research Directions

Future research on this topic can focus on reviving the conative psychology framework and its application. Measurement development may be challenging since it may be difficult to assess aspects like initiation latency, effort mobilization quantitatively. Research on interventions can assess whether educational, leadership, and clinical interventions informed by the framework

complement standard interventions, particularly within the Muslim contexts. Using the previously developed model of *khudi* (Khan & Malik, 2021), longitudinal developmental research could examine the cultivation of *khudi* across the lifespan. This paper primarily utilized the Urdu and English writings of Iqbal; further research may review his Farsi literature to refine the mapping presented here.

Conclusion

Conativism is an integrative framework that articulates the architecture of sustained action across four interlocking components. The framework is empirically productive but normatively incomplete; it specifies the mechanisms of pursuit without articulating what pursuit is worth sustaining. Muhammad Iqbal's philosophy of *khudi* is perhaps one of the most sophisticated articulations of conative selfhood in the modern philosophical tradition. This article does not attempt to reduce *khudi* to conation; rather, it attempts to explain the conative structure within certain aspects of *khudi* (*talab*, *ishq*, *junun*, *yaqin*, *faqr*, *amal*, etc.). It also attempts to provide a normative directionality, a transcendent telos, a qualitative differentiation between elevated and dissipated conation, and an integrated spirituality of action.

The integration of Iqbal's thought with contemporary Conativism is not decorative. It yields a richer theoretical framework for understanding volitional life and substantive resources for educational, leadership, and clinical work. The present paper has attempted to provide a usable map, what remains is the work of empirical validation, intervention development, and theological-philosophical dialogue. Iqbal himself would recognize the unfinishedness of this work as the proper form of any work worth undertaking. "Beyond the stars," he reminds his readers, "there are yet more worlds; the trials of love are still not over."

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