



Said Nursi; Bediuzzaman; Risale-I Nur; Islamic Philosophy; Islamic Theology

Edward Moad ¹ 

1. Department of Comparative Humanities, Habib University. E-mail: edward.moad@ahss.habib.edu.pk

Article Info:

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received:

8 February 2026

Received in revised form:

21 March 2026

Accepted:

15 April 2026

Published online:

15 July 2026

Keywords:

Said Nursi; Bediuzzaman;
Risale-I Nur; Islamic
Philosophy; Islamic
Theology

Abstract: Of twentieth century theologians, the Kurdish Said Nursi (1877-1960) has probably the largest influence on the Muslim community of today's Türkiye. This is largely due to his creative application of the insights of classical Islamic philosophical theology to the twentieth century scientific picture of the world, in response to challenges modern science allegedly raises to the continued relevance of traditional religious belief. This paper will examine the '32nd Word,' and '23rd Flash' from Said Nursi's (1877-1960) magnum opus, *Risale-I Nur*. First, we will review a parable Nursi uses to present his 'second proof' of God in the context of a modern "scientific" image of the Cosmos. Secondly, we will examine the metaphysical principles operative in the proof, showing that they are as applicable to the modern scientific paradigm of Nursi's context, as they were to the Aristotelian paradigm of his predecessors in the classical period of Islamic theology. Finally, we will show how Nursi anticipates the 'historical turn' in the philosophy of science, pose the question whether the prospect of relativism it raises threatens his theological project, and propose an answer, based on Nursi's text, which responds to a central theme in the story of modern philosophy.

Cite this article: Moad, E. (2026). Said Nursi; Bediuzzaman; Risale-I Nur; Islamic Philosophy; Islamic Theology, *Philosophical Meditations*, 15(Special issue: 37), 61-84. <https://doi.org/10.30470/phm.2026.2081997.2799>

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Publisher: University of Zanjan.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30470/phm.2026.2081997.2799>

Homepage: phm.znu.ac.ir



Introduction:

Nursi was born and educated in the village of Nurs, in the Bitlis province of eastern Türkiye. For his academic brilliance, he was invited to the residence and library of the Vilayet of Van, a Kurdish province of the Ottoman empire (Vahide, 2005, pp. 3, 28). There he learned Ottoman Turkish, the language of administration, and began making plans for reforming the local university system, advocating for educational reform and Ottoman unity until the First World War, during which he served in the Ottoman army (Abu-Rabi, 2003, p. 6). In 1916, the Russians captured and held him as a prisoner of war until he escaped two years later, returning to Istanbul as a hero (Balcı, 2011, pp. 60–62). When Mustafa Kemal, leader of the new Turkish Republic sought to control him by offering him a position as ‘Minister of Religious Affairs’ for the eastern provinces, he declined and instead began writing and distributing the *Risale – i Nur* (Vahide, 2005, p. 172).

Like many of his peers in the Muslim world at the time, Nursi

was subject to prison and exile as a threat to the reigning secular totalitarianism (Vahide, 2005, pp. 182, 286). Shortly after his death in 1960, a military coup overthrew the government, imprisoned hundreds of his students, desecrated his grave, and disposed of his body in a secret location (Vahide, 2005, p. 345). Yet in 2012, the Turkish government launched a nationwide effort to find and return him to his grave (“Turkey Seeks a Spiritual Leader’s Secret Grave,” 2012). The related change in the official stance toward the country’s Islamic heritage and its global profile have brought wider attention to Nursi’s contributions.

Part 1 - Conversations with the Cosmos

In the “32nd Word,” Nursi imagines a series of conversations between an “idolater,” and various constituents of the cosmos, “all those things set up as partners to God that all the different varieties of idolaters imagined to exist,” from a particle to the stars. The idolater, Nursi says, “wants to have mastery over one

of the beings in the universe, and so claim to be its true owner” (Nursi, 2002, pp. 139–140). In pre-modern Islam, discussions of idolatry often turned to astrology, which involves believing the stars have mastery over events on Earth, and not necessarily seeking mastery over them. Nursi’s idolater is essentially modern, and for his audience, a refuting astrology would have been redundant in a way that it was not for al-Ghazali (1058–1111) in the *Alchemy of Happiness*.

There, Ghazali tells a similar parable involving a conversation between a man suffering from a bout of existential angst, and a physician, a naturalist, and an astrologer. Each expert gives his diagnosis in turn, in terms of the elements of his own science. The physician finds the cause of the man’s ailment in his body, the naturalist finds the cause in some chemical imbalance, and the astrologer locates the cause in the stars. These sciences and their respective ‘causes’ are arranged in that hierarchy. The physician, according to al-Ghazali, is not wrong but only

limited to the sphere of his field, and does not rise to the ‘higher’ level of the naturalist to see that the causes located in the body are merely the effects of the elements understood by the naturalist. The naturalist, likewise, fails to see that the underlying causes determining matters in his field are the stars (al-Ghazali, 2005, pp. 50–52).

Thus, astrology is the ‘highest’ science in this hierarchy, though even the astrologer is wrong in thinking that the stars are the ultimate causes of the man’s ailment, for Allah is the one who has willed the whole affair in order to motivate the fortunate sufferer to turn toward Him. That al-Ghazali placed astrology at the ‘top’ of the natural sciences reflects the scientific paradigm dealt with in his context. So also does the fact that his parable is of a man seeking a cure from an ailment. That was a scientific paradigm for which, arguably, the most influential work was a comprehensive philosophical treatise by Ibn Sina (980–1037) entitled ‘The Book of Health’ (*Kitāb al-Shifā*).

It would be natural for modern laity to conflate this title

with Ibn Sina's Canon of Medicine, for isn't health in the purview of medicine? Yet while the Canon is a manual of medical practice, the Book of Health is wider in scope. It is a book of philosophy, which for Ibn Sina meant everything of which human learning is possible and in which every scientific field (including medicine) is placed in a comprehensive order of objectives, centered around neither 'knowledge for its own sake' nor 'power' as it is today, but instead 'health.' For Ibn Sina, 'health' is not merely a 'medical' matter as we construe it today, but something both more fundamental and objective.

By contrast, the aim of science in Nursi's context is power. Health is not connected to, and objectively definable, in terms of metaphysics, but in terms of objectives and values posited by the human being, and measured by one's power to realize them. Science had turned away from the teleological, irreducibly qualitative basis of al-Ghazali's context to the purely mechanical and quantitative: away from Aristotle and back to

Democritus. Thus Nursi's idolater turns first to the particle, "the smallest of all those beings...saying that he was to be its master and true owner".

As the particle replies "with the tongue of truth and dominical wisdom," it plays a role in a larger order. Therefore, mastery of the particle would require both knowledge of the ordered system in which it participates, and the power to bring about and maintain that order. "For there is such complete orderliness in our duties and motion that one who does not have infinite wisdom and all-encompassing knowledge cannot meddle with us," says the particle, "If he did, he would cause chaos" (Nursi, 2002, p. 140). Being incapable of that, the idolater ("just like the materialists," as Nursi says) challenges the particle to "own" itself. That is, he suggests that the order in nature is intrinsic to nature, or explicable in terms of its most basic constituents. Yet these are not the agents of the order of nature. For as the particle says, "if I had a face that looked to all the places in which I travel and all the beings in which I work, and an eye that

looked to them and words that carried authority with them, then perhaps I would indulge in foolishness like you and claim to own myself” (Nursi, 2002, p. 140).

Here and throughout the parable, each part of the cosmos repeatedly raises against the idolater the objection that it is but a part of a larger order. Mastery of the part will not, then confer mastery over the whole, because mastery over the whole is a necessary condition for mastery over any part, and such mastery is outside the ability of either the idolater or any part of the cosmos he seeks to own. Each entity Nursi’s idolater approaches is a feature or displays a feature, of the new twentieth century science assumed by many to obviate to belief in God.

Thus the red blood-corpuscle, explains to the idolater the role it plays, with its “fellows in the army of blood,” in the order of the cell. The cell, which the idolater assumes he can make since it is “made of several substances like a minute house,” explains that it plays a role in the order of veins, arteries, sensory and motor

nerves, etc. Only if the idolater can control all the numberless cells, maintaining the order of the body, would he be worthy of owning it. The human body requires, among other things, “the power and wisdom to lodge in a narrow, lowly vessel like me, immaterial and subtle faculties like the spirit, heart, and intellect.” Next, the idolater encounters humanity as a whole.

This is a disorganized and unruly group. Perhaps, like Satan interferes in their individual and social actions which they perform through the exercise of their wills, I’ll be able to find some way to interfere in the functioning of their bodies and natures. And then, finding some way, I’ll be able to exercise control over the body and the body’s cell which sent me packing (Nursi, 2002, p. 141).

Nursi seems to allude to two sorts of modern aspirations. Noticing the apparent disorganization of the human race, the idolater raises the prospect of social engineering. Through this “interference with the functioning of their bodies and their natures,” he dreams eventually of exercising

“control over the body and the body’s cell,” presumably through a process of eugenics or genetic engineering that social control (for example, control over government, scientific research funding, etc.) might make possible. Humanity objects by citing the biosphere, described as a shirt or carpet that covers the globe. It is part of this larger natural order, and therefore in no need of redesign by any erstwhile social engineer. “Do not say that, seeing confusion in my species, you will be able to interfere in some way, because the order is faultless,” it says. “Is it at all possible that the one who artistically positions one thread running through a whole carpet should be other than the master designer of the carpet...?” (Nursi, 2002, p. 143).

The biosphere, in turn, challenges the idolater to gain mastery of the planet on which its order depends. The idolater then demands mastery over the planet, claiming that it has no owner because it travels aimlessly (Nursi, 2002, p. 143). On the contrary, the planet responds, its orbit is perfectly arranged to sustain the order of the biosphere, in conjunction

with the other planets and centered around the sun (Nursi, 2002, p. 144). Of the sun, the idolater imagines that if he can “find a hole in it and open up a way in,” he would be able to “subjugate it as well as the earth.” As it turns out, this “hole” is to make the sun into a god, “as the fire worshippers speak” (Nursi, 2002, p. 146). “You are a ruler,” he says, “you own yourself; you dispose of matters freely, as you wish.” The sun replies, like the others, that it is merely a “subservient official,” and not the true owner of even a fly, “for in the fly’s being there are immaterial jewels and antique works of art, like eyes and ears, such as are not in my shop” (Nursi, 2002, p. 146).

Interestingly, the idolater’s tactic here is the reverse of that which he used against the particle, when he tried to trick it into claiming mastery of itself. Here, when the sun rejects the idolater’s attempt to flatter it into claiming mastery of itself he proceeds to claim it “on behalf of causes.” Says the sun, “I can only belong to one who is able to create all the lofty stars, which are my fellows.” The idolater thus approaches them

assuming that, since they are scattered, they are ‘under the jurisdiction of different rulers.’ They also object that they indeed form a unified order, delivering a “punishing slap” that sends the idolater in the “very pit of Hell,” nature into the “valley of delusion,” and chance into the “chasm of nonexistence.” Nothing in the cosmos is the result of chance, and the notion that nature is a cause or principle of order is delusion.

Part 2 - Islamic Metaphysics and the New Natural Science

A crucial intellectual achievement of classical Muslim scholars was to “Islamize” the the prevailing natural sciences by discovering within them the comprehensive order and signature of the Creator. In the centuries since, modern scientific changes had radically altered that model of the cosmos. When the sun usurped the earth’s place at the center of the universe, the Aristotelian spheres were shattered, giving way to a shapeless, possibly infinite cosmos and calling into question, from the perspective of natural science, its ultimate

order, or lack thereof. Once it was clear that the sun was just another of the ‘lofty stars’ which are its ‘fellows’, as Nursi puts it, even it lost its place at the center of things, leaving the cosmos with no physical center at all.

Muslims did not attach theological orthodoxy as closely to this Ptolemaic cosmology as did the Church. They averted that level of conflict with natural science by following al-Ghazali in accepting its methods and findings in a critical, tentative manner, carefully distinguishing the logically demonstrable from the empirically probable. Even if Ibn Rushd’s strict Aristotelianism had carried the day, the collapse of that cosmology would not have been as epistemologically catastrophic, given his strict separation between the “religious” and “scientific,” for which he would have opposed Nursi’s frequent use of this sort of parable.

His well-known charge against Al-Ghazali was of violating a strict intellectual segregation by using analogy and imaginative devices to

explain abstract concepts to members of the general public, either not properly schooled in the *Organon*, or naturally incapable of rising above the level of images and the senses to that of pure rationality. This, according to Ibn Rushd, opened the door for intellectual and social anarchy (Ibn Rushd, 2008, p. 27). Thus, he seemed to view Islam, on the ‘religious’ side of things, as merely a regime of social control through legal norms, with theology and metaphysics relegated to the other, elite side of the great divide.

Yet the *shahādah*, (the Muslim testimony of faith, that ‘there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger’) itself is a metaphysical proposition, and not, even for the uneducated the majority, merely an outward expression and password of sorts for community membership. Granted that a sophisticated philosophical understanding of *tawhid* (Islamic monotheism) is the purview of the educated elite, it does not follow that the rest of the community are simple parrots with no concept at all of the meaning of the expressions of faith. Islamic

civilization grew from the aspirations of people moved by an understanding and appreciation of *tawhid*, not simply on the need for community acceptance by the mechanical utterance or performance of otherwise meaningless Islamic “passwords.” In Nursi’s Türkiye, those “passwords” were no longer a key to community acceptance but a ticket to official exclusion. Anyone who wished to maintain an evidently Islamic form of life did so at considerable risk. Under those conditions, a Muslim public of the sort viewed as proper by Ibn Rushd would have ceased being a Muslim public very quickly.

Then how do the Muslim public understand *tawhid* and the basic doctrines of Islam, if we are not equally trained or capable of abstract metaphysical thought? It is through image and analogy. This is why the classical Muslims’ tentative, critical acceptance of natural science still reached the limit of its function as historical conditions changed. For while the metaphysical postulates of *tawhid* are, in fact, separate and

distinct from any particular model of the cosmos, the metaphysical order of being is, in the minds of most of the general public, understood through the image of some such model.

Thus, a contemporary creationist might ask an atheist, 'who set off the Big Bang'? The very question supposes that one can only establish a relation between God and the cosmos by locating a 'position' for God on the spatiotemporal model of contemporary cosmology. The average person's mode of understanding, then, does render their tawhid vulnerable to changes in the physical model of the cosmos offered by the dominant natural scientific theory. Not everyone can operate intellectually at the level of abstraction required to deal with metaphysics separately from the physical (the state of affairs in contemporary western metaphysics attests to that). It then becomes necessary, when the physical model of the cosmos shifts, to explain tawhid anew, through the new image rather than beyond or outside of it, as the philosophers either

succeed or pretend to do.

This is what Nursi has done here. The objective is to encircle the new scientific paradigm, and then to meet the challenge of those who would use it to undermine tawhid by putting it back under the metaphysical paradigm of tawhid. That is, to deploy metaphysical principles to show that the order of nature in light of the new scientific paradigm is a sign and evidence of the existence and all-pervasive providence of God. This, of course, entails that the metaphysical principles in question are in one sense independent of the natural scientific paradigm to which we apply them, so that for any possible scientific model of natural order, we could show that it is a sign of God.

That is, for example, whether the Earth or the Sun is at the center of the cosmos, the inference from cosmos to God will still be valid. This invites the charge of being unfalsifiable and therefore unscientific on Karl Popper's standard. The response is to agree that the exercise just is not a scientific one in that sense. Rather, it is a recognition of the encirclement

of any scientific model of natural order by metaphysical principles that are conditions of the possibility of natural order, and which entail the existence of a providential Creator. That encirclement is metaphysical, not spatio-temporal. Yet for reasons just explained, the imagination leads us to locate it at a spatio-temporal perimeter of the cosmos: at an imagined Big Bang, the outer sphere of the stars, or the level of some sub-atomic particle. Then when the perimeter of the old cosmos explodes, the Divine order goes with it. Thus, Nursi has us travel with his opponent through the new cosmos, from one edge to the other – from its particles to its stars – to rediscover the Divinity of its order. The aim of the encounter with those elements of the cosmos is to reawaken recognition of the metaphysical principles that lead one from it to God. These principles comprise what we can call the arguments from contingency and from unity, respectively. Hence, Nursi writes:

Indeed, the All-Powerful One of Glory has two ways of creating:
The First is through origination

and invention. That is, He brings a being into existence out of nothing, out of non-existence, and creates everything necessary for it, also out of nothing, and places those necessities in its hand.

The Second is through composition, through art. That is, He forms certain beings out of the elements of the universe in order to demonstrate subtle instances of wisdom, like displaying the perfections of His wisdom and the manifestations of many of His names. Through the law of providing, he sends particles and matter, which are dependent on His command, to these beings and employs the particles in them (Nursi, 2002, p. 175).

The first way of creating follows from the principle that any contingent existent depends for its existence on some other existing thing or things. Thus, whatever comes to be requires a cause. The second follows from the principle that, as Nursi puts it, “If a being has unity, it can only have issued from a single being, from one hand” (Nursi, 2002, p. 157). This is not to be confused with a different

principle adopted by al-Farabi among others, that if a being has unity only one thing can issue from it. Nursi's is the one al-Kindi used to articulate systematically the inference from the cosmos to God. In *On First Philosophy* he discusses several ways in which things are said to be 'one', including in terms of genus, form, individuality, difference, and common and proper accident (al-Kindi, 2012, p. 28).

Since most of these terms are specific to the Aristotelian paradigm and do not apply to modern science, one might argue, they are merely conventional and do not correspond to anything in nature. In this case, Al-Kindi's ideas about how things are 'one' applies to an obsolete scientific theory rather than nature itself. Yet the application of unity to these terms, according to Al-Kindi, follows from the fact that unity applies to the individual, all, part, whole, and some. These are terms from which specifically Aristotelian terms like genus, species, etc. are generated, and which do apply in the quantitative framework of modern science. Still, one might

object, that we once mistakenly took the terms of Aristotelian science as natural raises the prospect that the terms of modern science are equally conventional, contingent, and liable to change. In that case, al-Kindi's considerations about unity will still not apply to reality or nature itself, but merely to our current scientific paradigm, for however long it lasts. Properly understood, however, that is all al-Kindi needs, so long as our theory postulates the existence of something.

But the individual is only one by convention, since every individual is divisible. Therefore [the individual] is not one essentially. The oneness of individuals is distinct from the individual itself, for if [the individual] is not one in essence, then the oneness in it, which is by convention and not essential to it, is not oneness that belongs to it truly. That which is not essential to something in its true nature is in it in an accidental way. That which occurs accidentally in something is caused by something else; the accidental is an impression in what has the

accident. And ‘impression’ is brought about by something additional; the impression is caused by an impresser. Therefore, the oneness in the individual is necessarily an impression caused by an impresser (al-Kindi, 2012, pp. 29–30).

We can summarize the argument here as follows:

1. Every divisible individual is one accidentally (not essentially).
2. That which is accidental to something is caused by something else.

Therefore, the unity of anything that is divisible requires an external cause.

Furthermore, whatever is in one thing by accident is in something else essentially, because everything that is in one thing by accident is in another thing by essence.

Since we have shown that oneness is in all these things by accident, they belong to something else by essence and not by accident. Thus the oneness that is in something by accident is a oneness that is acquired by it, from what has oneness in it by essence: here is

necessarily a true One whose unity is not an affect (al-Kindi, 2012, pp. 32–33).

This completes Al-Kindi’s argument, continuing from the conclusion of the previous inference: either something is essentially one or not. If not, there would be an infinite regress of accidental unity, and thus no unity at all. Therefore, if anything has accidental unity then there is something, which is essentially one. Things do have accidental unity. Thus, ‘a true One whose unity is not an effect’ must exist.

Nursi focuses this argument on the new dimensions, revealed by modern sciences, of divisibility and unity in things, in two directions. In the ‘downward’ direction, he starts with the particle. Is this particle supposed to represent a basic unit of divisibility in the cosmos? Is it an atom in the classical sense? If so, then it would be an indivisible individual, therefore essentially one and not made one by something else, as per Al-Kindi’s argument. In that case, it might be argued that the atom is the essentially one, which the accidental unity of everything else entails. This explains why

the modern idolater might look to the ‘particle’, as Nursi portrays it, through which to gain mastery of the cosmos. In this, he would be relying on the atomists being right, and Al-Kindi (and his Aristotelianism) wrong on the infinite divisibility of matter.

The particles of modern science (even those called ‘atoms’) are not the atoms of classical atomism. Modern science has not arrived at a consensus on the question of the infinite divisibility of matter. Nursi’s particle and the other elements of the cosmos respond in a manner that does not depend on which side of that issue the truth lies. For the unity to which it makes reference is not its intrinsic constitutional unity. It refers to what we might call the ‘ecological’ unity of the larger system of which it is a part. These two dimensions of a thing’s unity are distinguished most explicitly in the idolater’s conversation with the cell, but the dimension Nursi concentrates on here is the ‘ecological’ dimension.

That is, the unity by which multiple individuals of a single type function similarly in their role as parts of a larger ordered

system calls for explanation. Can the cause of this order be located severally, in each of the individual participants? The answer is no. Since the system itself transcends any of its individual parts, its unity transcends that of any of its parts. Coordination of the parts is more than their mere sum. Nursi illustrates this quite beautifully with the following analogy:

The sun’s manifestations and reflections appear in all small fragments of glass and droplets on the face of the Earth. If those miniature, reflected imaginary suns are not ascribed to the sun in the sky, it is necessary to accept the external existence of an actual sun in every tiny fragment of glass smaller than a match-head, which possesses the sun’s qualities and which, though small in size, bears profound meaning; and therefore to accept actual suns to the number of pieces of glass (Nursi, 2002, p. 161).

In Nursi’s context, science was understood (philosophically, at least) in terms of the broadly positivist narrative according to which modern natural science is

uniquely successful and cumulative, because it evaluates everything against the neutral, objective standard of empirical data. Consequently, the terms of modern science reflect nature, and are not mere conventions like previous ‘mythological’ ways of explaining the world. European and western-influenced philosophical circles were still in the glow of the success of Newton’s physical theory.

Part 3 - Islamic Metaphysics and the New Sophistry

With the displacement of the Newtonian system by Einstein’s Relativity theory, they found reason to question the positivistic understanding of scientific progress. The claim that science can discover the fundamental order of nature begs the question, how could we ever be sure that it has, and that a new theory will not displace our current understanding? At the time Nursi was engaging in the challenges of the positivistic scientism that made modern science its banner, these questions had not yet culminated in the critical, historical study of scientific change, revolution, and claims to progress produced by the

likes of Kuhn or Feyerband.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn observed that mature, normal science always operates under a common paradigm – a basic framework that determines what problems are worth solving and what counts as an acceptable solution. This requires a consensus among the scientific community. Contrary to the positivist model, they do not arrive at this consensus through the algorithmic evaluation of theory against a set of shared theory neutral data. For one, there is no shared data outside of a theoretical paradigm, which provides the terms through which alone description of the data is possible. The terms of different theoretical paradigms are incommensurable. Since there is no common standard by means of which we could translate the terms of one fundamental theory into those of another, there can be no theory-neutral data.

Scientific revolution – or paradigm shift – occurs when scientists doing normal science within a shared paradigm encounter an anomaly; that is, a problem that stubbornly resists solution under the current

paradigm. When this leads scientists to question the paradigm itself, it brings on the phase of revolutionary science, when some begin working on fundamentally different theoretical frameworks in pursuit of a solution to the anomaly. This obviates any common standard by which we might judge between competing theories. We cannot then explain how and why one theory rather than another ultimately replaces the old paradigm in the pristine way the positivist model took to be the case.

Significantly, the process is informed by, among other factors, value judgments beyond those understood by the positivists as “properly scientific,” including judgments about what we want our science to do for us. This realization led to a new interest in the social dimension of who makes these value judgments, why, and how they influence the direction of scientific research. We are more aware of the role of scientific institutions, government, private enterprise, and culture in shaping the framework by which problems are defined and solutions are evaluated and pursued. The idealized model of

rationality and neutral data made way for an awareness of the decisive influence of human needs and values on scientific processes and outcomes.

In this respect, Nursi was of his time. In the “Fifth Proof” of the “32nd Word” where he discusses the “Divine Name of the Sapien,” he writes:

With His names of Sapien and All-Wise, the All-Powerful Maker has included thousands of well-ordered worlds in this world. Within those worlds he created man as a centre and pivot who of all creatures manifests the wisdom and purposes in the universe. The most important of the instances of wisdom and benefits look to sustenance and are manifest through it. The manifestation of the name of All-Wise is apparent in brilliant form in man through his intelligence and the pleasure he receives from sustenance. Each one of the hundreds of sciences discovered by human intelligence describes a manifestation of the name of Sapien in the realm of creation (Nursi, 2002, p. 183).

Thereafter, Nursi personifies the various sciences, imaging that we ask each one “what is the universe?” The

science of medicine would reply that the universe is a “vast, orderly, and perfect pharmacy.” Chemistry would reply that it is a “perfectly ordered chemist’s shop.” For engineering, the universe is a factory. For agriculture, the universe is a garden. For commerce, the universe is a market, for economics a warehouse, etc. In each case, the nature of the world according to the science in question corresponds to the specific needs and aims with which that science approaches it. This is the sense in which God has “included thousands of well-ordered worlds within this world” with the human being as “centre and pivot.” Nursi anticipates the historical turn in philosophy of science here, simply by his observation that science is guided by human needs and aims from which it is not autonomous, to say nothing of his assertion that the world according to a science is fundamentally shaped by those needs and aims.

But in characterizing the human being as a “centre and pivot” of the world – that is, in characterizing the “world according to” as, indeed, a world – he recalls an idea that

goes at least as far back as Protagoras’ assertion that “man is the measure of all things.” Nursi, however, is no Sophist. His claim is that God created man as a measure. Yet this raises a question. Once we take the view that our world is a world according to us, shaped by our aims and needs: how can we continue to take the order of our world as an objective indicator of a transcendent Creator? Perhaps the order of the world is only indicative of the nature of our needs and aims.

At the end of his “Third Proof,” Nursi deals with two groups of “the most advanced philosophers who did not consider beings in the light of the Qur’an” and consequently “saw that the formation and existence of beings by means of nature and causes was so difficult as to be impossible” (Nursi, 2002, p. 174). The first is a group Nursi refers to as ‘Sophists,’ and the second are according to his description, materialists. The second group, he writes, “saw that in misguidance, according to which causes and nature are creator, the creation of a fly or a seed, even, entails innumerable

difficulties and requires a power unacceptable to reason” (Nursi, 2002, p. 174).

They were therefore compelled to deny the act of creation and to say: “Nothing can exist out of nothing.” Seeing total annihilation also to be impossible, they declared: “What exists cannot go to nothing.” They fancied an imaginary situation in which combining and decomposition, gathering together and dispersion, occur through the motion of particles and the winds of chance (Nursi, 2002, p. 174).

Nursi responded to this position in what we have reviewed above and in numerous other places. The Sophists, according to Nursi, took an opposite path. They “found it easier to deny the universe’s existence, and even their own existences, than to follow the way of misguidance, which claims that causes and nature have the power to create,” he writes. “They therefore denied both themselves and the universe and descended into absolute ignorance” (Nursi, 2002, p. 174). We might read this as a reference, not primarily to the

ancient Greeks but to the modern Europeans.

Flush with the success of natural science, early modern empiricists deployed their epistemology to justify the authority of a new order against the rationalist scholasticism of the Church. Yet once David Hume (1711-1776) took that to its logical conclusion, it seemed no philosophical justification for natural science is possible. For the principles of causation and unity necessary for any such justification are not themselves empirically justifiable. This led him, famously, to skepticism about both the external world and the self.

It also led to Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) attempt to justify them as structural features of human consciousness, and to redefine objectivity as the conformity of our experience to conditions following from that rather than as its correspondence to the order of any independent reality. Prior to assuming the terms of the theory itself, it arguably amounts to denying the existence of the “universe” in favor of consciousness and its order. The universe “in itself” and the principle of its order,

along with the self, are noumena. We cannot know that they exist, but we cannot help thinking so. What this actually means for their existence is ambiguous.

Hegel affirms the existence of the universe by denying it, simply identifying the world according to the collective human consciousness as the world in itself; and denies the existence of individual consciousness altogether. He and Kant were arguably attempting to ride more than one fence, as Nietzsche (1844-1900) pointed out. It was the latter to which we can give credit for following the logic through by univocally denying the existence of the world and the self, and then owning up to the absurdity that entails. It is Kant and Nietzsche whom we can usefully recall when Nursi when writes:

Indeed, everyone sees the world in his own mirror. God Almighty created man as a measure and scale for the universe. And from the world He gave a particular world to each person (Nursi, 2002, p. 171).

The proposition that everyone sees the world in his

own mirror reflects the Kantian move of identifying the mind itself as the organizing principle underwriting the order of nature. Yet Nursi says God has created man as a measure and scale of the universe. For to explain the order of nature by putting it down to the order of the human mind only begs the question as to what explains the order of the mind. It does not explain why the structural order of the mind is this way rather than another, or why any ordered and ordering mind exists at all. Either the structure of human consciousness explains the order of nature, or vice versa, but you cannot have it both ways. Kant performs a kind of sleight of hand, “passing the buck” in a circle, creating the appearance of having explained order in a cleverly self-contained manner without any transcendent reference.

Nursi recognizes, with Kant, that the nature of one’s mind shapes the “world” in which each of us lives. Yet to explain the order of one’s world in terms of the structure of one’s mind is already to accept that the existence of an ordered reality requires an explanation, and a mind is neither a necessary

existent nor a creator. It is a contingent, ordered existent begging explanation. Otherwise, Kant may just as well have claimed to be God. Why not? According to him, there is no philosophical proof for the existence of other minds (he called this the “scandal of philosophy”), and it would be impossible on his epistemology. The only mind determining the order of reality should be his own.

Now if the cognitive structure he makes responsible for this order is necessary in itself, then he is a necessary existent, emanating his own private cosmos in the only possible order it could have, just like the neo-Platonic god of the *falasifa*. If not then either, he creates the fundamental order of his own mind, or something else does. If the former, then he would be God, creating the order of the cosmos by sheer voluntary will; and if the order of his mind is explained by something else, then what? It cannot be by the order of “reality” since Kant is claiming to explain that in terms of the order of the mind. So it would have to be something outside ‘reality’ in the Kantian sense;

that is, outside possible experience.

To avoid that, Kant passes the buck back to the “world” in the circular way just mentioned. The effect of this really is to deny the existence of the world and then the existence of the self simultaneously by circularly reducing the one to the other. Though Nursi (like Kant and unlike Hegel), acknowledges the existence of individual consciousness, he recognizes (like Hegel and unlike Kant) that the nature of one’s subjectivity is not necessary and that the ways it can shape one’s world are diverse and contingent. This ultimately brings him closer to Nietzsche, while also setting them in direct opposition.

And from the world he gave a particular world to each person. This world he colors for him in accordance with his sincere beliefs. For example, a despairing, lamenting, weeping person sees beings as weeping and in despair, while a cheerful, optimistic, merry person sees the universe as joyful and smiling. A reflective man given to solemn worship and glorification discovers and sees to a degree the certain, truly

existent worship and glorification of beings, while a person who abandons worship and glorification through either neglect or denial sees beings in a manner totally contrary and opposed to the reality of their perfections and so transgresses their rights.

Nietzsche shares with Nursi, the idea that the “world” responds to the aims and needs of the subject. In “The Dancing Song” of Thus Spake Zarathustra, he depicts a love triangle between himself, his wisdom, and life.

Into your eyes I looked recently, O life! And into the unfathomable I then seemed to be sinking. But you pulled me out with your golden fishing rod; and you laughed mockingly when I called you unfathomable.

“Thus runs the speech of all fish,” you said; “what they do not fathom is unfathomable. But I am merely changeable and wild and a woman in every way, and not virtuous – even if you men call me profound, faithful, eternal, and mysterious. But you men always present us with your own virtues, O you virtuous men!”

Thus she laughed, the

incredible one; but I never believe her and her laughter when she speaks ill of herself. And when I talked in confidence with my wild wisdom she said to me in anger, “You will, you want, you love – that is the only reason why you praise life.” Then I almost answered wickedly and told the angry woman the truth; and there is no more wicked answer than telling one’s wisdom the truth.

For thus matters stand among the three of us: Deeply I love only life – and verily, most of all when I hate life. But that I am well disposed toward wisdom, and often too well, that is because she reminds me so much of life. She has her eyes, her laugh, and even her little golden fishing rod: is it my fault that the two look so similar? (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 220).

From the world, as Nursi put it, there is a “world” particular to the individual. What is the relation between these two “worlds”? For Nietzsche, this question seemed “unfathomable,” and the world / life (or is it only his particular “world” / wisdom?) insists that there is just nothing to fathom. Thus, Nietzsche’s life/wisdom, after much reflection, takes the

opposite path of Nursi's reflective man who "discovers and sees to a certain degree, the truly existent worship and glorification of beings." Any apparent "virtue," for Nietzsche, is from his particular "world" and not in the world. It is, he implies, his "fault" that the "two" look so similar. Yet then he describes his "wisdom" to "life." "She is changeable and stubborn: I have often seen her bite her lip and comb her hair against the grain," he says, "Perhaps she is evil and false and a female in every way..." To this, "life" laughs: "Of whom are you speaking...no doubt of me" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 221).

Nursi's diagnosis of Nietzsche would be that God has made for him, from the world, a particular "world" that is evil and false to correspond with his own evil and false "wisdom." It is not Nietzsche's doing that the two are similar, but it is his fault that they are evil and false as he describes. This is ironic, given what he has to say elsewhere in the same book, on the "Preachers of Death." "They encounter a sick man or an old man or a corpse, and immediately they say, "Life

is refuted," he writes, "But only they themselves are refuted, and their eyes, which see only this one face of existence" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 157).

Both Nietzsche and Nursi reject the notion that a relation between the world and one's "world" can be "fathomed" in terms of merely mechanical natural or causal laws. Nursi writes:

It is clear and self-evident that aims, purposes, instances of wisdom, and benefits can only be followed through choice, will, intention, and volition, not in any other way. Neither could they be the work of unconscious causes and nature, which lack will, choice, and purpose, nor could they interfere in them (Nursi, 2002, p. 184).

Perhaps we can formalize Nursi's argument here as follows:

1. The cosmos responds to our purposes through a single power that governs the cosmos.
2. Response to purpose is always through will.

Therefore the cosmos responds to our purposes through a will (not through unconscious causes or nature)

that has power over the cosmos.

In *Will to Power*, where Nietzsche addresses the skeptical problem of causation, he departs from Hume's theory. "That which gives the extraordinary firmness to our belief in causality is not the great habit of seeing one occurrence following another," he says, "but our inability to interpret events otherwise than as events caused by intentions" (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 550). This could lead to the conclusion, similar to Nursi's, that a single Will governs all events in the world, including the relation between the world and our particular "worlds." Instead, Nietzsche argues that our own notion of causation-by-intention is a fiction resulting from the fiction of a substantial self that intends and acts.

Thus, he denies the metaphysical principle of unity that would lead one to infer the existence of the individual self and God. Consequently, there is for him no world, self, or God, but somehow only particular "worlds" with no individuals to which they are particular, for the existence of any would be simply fictional figments of their "worlds." The "world" is a

kind of nobody's will to power floating around in nowhere. The clue to what drove him to this point lies, perhaps in his "proof" of atheism.

But let me reveal my heart to you entirely, my friends: if there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! Hence there are no gods. Though I drew this conclusion, now it draws me (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 198).

Nursi assesses the tragic outcome with a degree of respect.

I might even say that among the people of unbelief, the Sophists, who are supposed to be stupid because they denied the universe's existence, are the most intelligent. For since on accepting its existence, it was not possible not to believe in God and its Creator, they started to deny the universe's existence. They denied themselves as well. Saying, "There is nothing," they abdicated their intelligences, and being saved from the boundless unreasonableness – under the guise of reason – of the other deniers, they in one sense drew close to reason (Nursi, 2002, p. 198).

Conclusion

Said Nursi's engagement with alleged challenges posed to

tawhid by modern science illustrates both the timeless richness of Islamic metaphysics, as well as his own genius in discovering and applying that to the specific problems and context of his time. In this paper, we have seen a bit of this genius of his in action, in response to two very different attempts to undermine belief in the existence and providence of God. The first was the illegitimate claim of epistemic hegemony by a positivistic scientism, in the name of power through the control of matter. The second was the relativism and consequent nihilism of the new ‘Sophists’. These two challenges remain, perhaps, even more socially salient than in Nursi’s time, and this paper has only scratched the surface of Nursi’s literature, uncovering a powerful expression of intellectual resistance, rooted in timeless principles but articulated in contemporary terms, which has hitherto been mostly ignored by the world outside Türkiye.

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