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SAID NURSI**

**THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ISLAMIC
THOUGHT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
AND BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI**

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by Şükran Vahide

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Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Philosophy of Death

Mustafa Binhamza

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Endeavour to explain the reality of death has busied the minds of scholars and philosophers since early times. They have had many conceptions of it depending on their intellectual positions and schools. Some of them considered death on the physical level and explained it as the body ceasing to be able to carry out its physiological functions because of natural causes. Others approached the subject from the spiritual angle, saying it was the severing of the bond between body and spirit, and stressing its necessity for the commencement of a new stage in which a higher and more noble life would be manifested.

The latter are Muslim thinkers, who have considered death to be the first stop on the journey to the life of the hereafter. The matter is clearly stated in God's Book, where attention is drawn to death being created like life, and its being an inseparable part of life. God Almighty says: *Blessed be He in Whose hands is dominion; and He over all things has power * He who created death and life, that He may try which of you is best in deed.*¹ The scholars' discussions of the createdness of death show that death too manifests existence. For it is unthinkable that something non-existent should be described as created. The books on the tenets of belief have therefore dealt with the subjects of existence and transience at great length.

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1. Qur'an, 67:1-2.

There have been two major movements which have discussed death:

The first of these was the Mu'tazilite and Naturalist movements.

The second, the Sunni movement.

Firstly: The Mu'tazilite and Naturalist Schools and their Conception of Death

The two ways of the Mu'tazilites and the Naturalists were not in complete agreement in their treatment of death. Nevertheless, since there were between them a number of shared points, I shall discuss the two parts together, as below.

It was the view of both that death is the fading of the nucleus of life. The body ceases to be able to perform its physiological functions. Death is the state of non-existence which "plucks life out of the body." They made various statements based on the above conception:

- Death is the cessation of the life of a being which was living, or which was qualified by life.

- Death is defined as the soul departing from the body,² the spirit parting from the body,³ and life ceasing.⁴

Although the terms used in these definitions differ from one another, they agree on the point of death being an 'accident' (non-essential) and the opposite of life.⁵ Zamakhshari, a member of the Mu'tazilite School, expressed the contrasting of life and death as follows:

"Life may be perceived through its existence. It may be said that for a thing to be living, it must possess knowledge and power, while death is the non-existence of this."⁶

Members of this school concluded from the following verse of the Qur'an that death is created: "*He who created death and life.*"⁷ They found no better way than interpreting this verse, and in doing so they put forward various ideas. Some of them asserted that death was created since there were various causes of it. Some of them, while expounding the verb "created," said that it held the meaning of (*mu'awwal*) "determined" (*qadara*). Zamakhshari said that "the meaning of '*who created death and life*' is the bringing into existence and annihilation of all beings."⁸

2. Tahanawī, *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn*, iii, 1316.

3. Abū Ḥammād 'Abd al-Sālimī, *Mushāriq Anwār al-Uqūl* (*taḥqīq*, 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Amīra), Beirut, ii, 88.

4. Ibid.

5. Experts in logic say there are four sorts of death (*fanā*): *taqābul al-naqḍayn*; that is, the coming together of two things that invalidate or destroy each other. This is also called negation and necessity, as in the coming together of man and what is not man, or of black and what is not black, like the meeting of a mental faculty and the lack of it, or blindness and sight, or riches and poverty. *Taqābul al-ḥadāyyn*, the coming together of opposites, such as heat and cold, and virtue and vice. *Taqābul al-mutaḍāyiyayn*, the coming together of two related or relative things, such as upper and lower, brother and sister, one of which is dependent on the other.

6. Zamakhshari, *Kashshāf*, iv, 113.

7. Qur'an, 67:2.

8. Zamakhshari, *Kashshāf*, iv, 134.

The author of *al-Tahrîr wa'l-Tanwîr* said: "The meaning of *Who created death* is His giving existence to its causes. Because death itself is non-existence; it is not connected with creation in the true sense. But since it is an incident for creatures, it is expressed as creation due to the results it brings about."⁹

According to those holding the naturalist Mu'tazilite view, death is non-existence; it means the attribute of life in man being terminated in absolute fashion. This led to studies of death and since man was subject to change as the imperative of creative nature, this necessitated death being divided into different sorts.

The Mu'tazilites and Naturalists made a twofold classification of death:

1. Natural death.

2. Death as the result of causes which put an end to life.

According to the above, natural death, which is also known as 'debility,' is the evacuation of the bodily moisture. This is said to be a necessary natural cause of death.¹⁰ There is in the human body a specific and limited amount of the 'matter of life.' This changes from one person to another in accordance with the combinations of specific elements, the 'humours.' For example, in respect of the substance of life that it contains, the 'sanguine' element is of longer life than those of 'bile' and 'phlegm.'¹¹

As is understood from the above, human cells have a specific lifespan. But it is unthinkable that this should be as long as the lifespan of large animals, for example, dinosaurs.

For man, natural death occurs with the exhaustion of the life-energy in the body. Particularly in old age, this energy in the body diminishes with the gradual weakening of all the ties with life.

To come to the second sort of death, it is that resulting from causes which nullify life. It occurs through the extinguishing of the life-force, known as bodily heat. This sort of death does not arise from the necessary causes of natural death; it occurs through 'accidental' causes which terminate life. Examples of causes putting an end to the normal course of life may be murder, drowning, and illness.

Concerning natural death and death by other causes it should be said that doubtless both are conceived of in purely physical terms. However, the majority of Muslim thinkers have discussed this point in books of medicine under particular headings such as health, illness, remedies, and death.

Ancient physicians for the most part relied on the treatises of philosophers, in which the physical aspect of death, which is visible, was discussed. The researches of physicians were therefore concentrated in this area.

The author of *al-Rahma fî'l-Tibb wa'l-Hikma* writes this:

"There are three causes of death: the first are causes like murder and old age. Secondly, excess of one of the four humours. The third is the expiring of natural life,

9. Muḥammad al-Tāhir ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Tahrîr wa'l-Tanwîr*, xiii, 29.

10. Tahanawî, *Kashshâf Iştilâhât al-Funûn*, iii, 1917.

11. *al-Nashr al-Tayyib 'alâ Sharḥ al-Shaykh al-Tayyib al-Idrîsî al-Vazânî*, ii, 317.

which occurs with completion of the four ages of man. From childhood to maturity the natural, vital moisture is hot. This period continues to five years, and at the most, twenty years of age. Then the period of dryness begins. This characteristic comes to dominate the hot and hard nature which persisted through the period of youth. This period becomes apparent around forty years of age. Then a stage of becoming watery and limp begins in the body, and old age becomes apparent. Strength lessens and the moisture pretty well dries up. The period of old age continues to seventy or eighty years of age. The coldness and dryness are manifested and due to weakness, the heat lessens considerably. This is called senility. Moisture and heat do not disappear completely until death. This may continue to one hundred and twenty years of age, though those who reach it are very rare. At the hour appointed by Almighty God, the majority lose the nature of life in the way mentioned above, and this is natural death."¹²

I want to apologize and make clear that those who have stated there are two sorts of death have made a blatant error. For they have not taken another important factor, that of the spirit, into consideration, and have not discussed it. Just as they have not discussed the appointed hour and its coming, which is the true cause of death. It is said in *al-Jawhara*:

*The murdered person died because his time had come;
To say anything else is futile, and unacceptable.*

If death is the result of the arrival of the appointed hour, this fact should be included in the definition of death. If spirit is an inseparable part of man, its separation from the body should be mentioned, in order to complete the discussion of death.

The Mu'tazilites insisted on the necessity of differentiating the natural aspect of death, and therefore added another element to the subject. This was discussion of the appointed hour. They questioned the nature of the death of someone murdered, and discussed the matter to excess. Ka'bi, one of them, said that a murdered person had two appointed hours of death. The first was one which was the result of murder, and the other, the appointed hour that he would any way have met whether or not he had been murdered. But in general, the Mu'tazilite School held the view that a murdered person had only one appointed hour, and this was his death, known by God whether or not he was murdered.

Abu Hudhayl al-'Allāf said: "The murdered person has a single appointed hour, and that is the instant he is murdered. If he had not been murdered, he still would have died, for some other reason."¹³

There are numerous views besides these. Outside al-'Allāf's views, the Mu'tazilites conceptions are artificial and far from what is necessitated by the verse: *When their time of death comes, they cannot delay it one hour, or prevent it.*¹⁴

12. *al-Nashr al-Tayyib*, ii, 370; *Sharḥ al-Bījūrī 'alā'l-Jawhara*, 160.

13. *al-Bījūrī, Sharḥ Jawharat al-Tawḥīd*, 161; *al-Nashr al-Tayyib*, ii, 375.

14. *Qur'an*, 7:32.

Secondly: The Sunni School's Understanding of Death

The Sunnis founded a school different to that of the Mu'tazilites and Naturalists based on the statements of the Qur'an. These they put forward as evidence that death is created, that is, it has existence. Their definitions were based on these statements and some of them are as follows:

- Death is an attribute which has existence and is created as the opposite of life.¹⁵
- Or, it is an attribute which is existent and is the opposite of life.¹⁶
- Or, it is a created state which is applicable to all living creatures.¹⁷

On studying these definitions in the books on the tenets of belief, it is seen that they agree in describing death—whether a 'substance' or an 'accident'—as having existence. Nevertheless, there are still a number of obscure points in these definitions. From these points of view, the intellect may consider death to be sheer non-existence, a perishing, and an arrest. These 'accidents' do not permit things to be thought of as having existence. For they are the opposite of other similar 'accidents' which have existence. This necessitates carrying out further analyses powerful enough to bring one closer to the Qur'anic meanings related to death, and finding answers to the questions that occur to one, and throwing light on certain forced interpretations and obscurities. This difficult task was carried out by Bediuzzaman. With rare ingenuity and a profundity little encountered, he dealt with the question of death's createdness, although it appears to be the opposite.

Bediuzzaman and the Philosophy of Death

It is clear that there have been many who have been concerned with the question of death and attempted to conceive of it within the framework of the Qur'an's statements. The careful investigator even will for the most part find no solace or solution for his difficulties in these discussions. He will see that many aspects of the subjects have remained obscure, and feel the need to seek new solutions.

These difficulties have persisted, but doubtless, if those preoccupied with such intellectual problems were to direct their questions about the subject to Bediuzzaman, they would find very convincing answers in his work called *Mektûbat*, which is part of the Risale-i Nur Collection. He asks:

"Verses like the following in the All-Wise Qur'an, the Criterion of Truth and Falsehood,

Who creates death and life that He may try you, which of you is the best in conduct, make it understood that 'death is created like life, and it too is a bounty.' Whereas

15. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ra'ûf al-Munâwî, *al-Tawqîf 'alâ Muḥimmât al-Ta'ârîf* [taḥqîq: Muḥammad Ridwân al-Dâya], 683; Râghib al-Isfahânî, *Mufradât*, 497; al-Jurjânî, *al-Ta'rîfât*, 211.

16. Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî, *al-Tafsîr*, xxx, 55; Abû Muḥammad 'Abd al-Sâlimî, *Mashâriq Anwâr al-'Uqûl* [taḥqîq: 'Abd al-Raḥmân 'Amîra], ii, 66.

17. Abû Muḥammad 'Abd al-Sâlimî, *Mashâriq Anwâr al-'Uqûl*, ii, 66; al-Bijûrî, *yuqârin bi-sharḥ al-Jawhara* [taḥrîj: Muḥammad Adîb al-Kaylânî], 349.

apparently death is dissolution, non-existence, decay, the extinction of life, the annihilator of pleasures; how can it be created and a bounty?"¹⁸

As far as I can see, such a question could be asked only by a thinker who has defined the difficulty in the true sense. It expresses two clear ideas, death being a bounty, and its having existence. It is difficult to bring the two points together and defend this in convincing fashion.

To consider the side of death which is a bounty; Bediuzzaman discusses the subject in four 'Aspects.'

"The First: It is a great bounty because it is to be freed from the duties and obligations of life, which become burdensome, and is a door through which to join and be united with the ninety-nine out of a hundred of one's friends who are already in the Intermediate Realm.

"The Second: It is a release from the narrow, irksome, turbulent, and agitated prison of this world, and, manifesting an expansive, joyful, troublefree immortal life, it is to enter the sphere of mercy of the Eternally Beloved One.

"The Third: There are numerous factors like old age which make the conditions of life arduous and show death to be a bounty far superior to life. For example, if together with your very elderly parents who cause you much distress were now in front of you your grandfather's grandfathers in all their pitiful state, you would understand what a calamity is life, and what a bounty, death. Also for example, it is understood how difficult are the lives in the conditions of winter of the beautiful flying insects, the lovers of the beautiful flowers, and what mercy are their deaths.

"The Fourth: Just as sleep is a comfort, a mercy, a rest, particularly for those afflicted by disaster and the wounded and the sick, so too is death, the elder brother of sleep, a pure bounty and mercy for those struck by disaster and suffering tribulations which drive them to suicide. However, as is proved decisively in many of the Words, for the people of misguidance, death is pure torment like life, and pure affliction, but it is outside the discussion here."¹⁹

Bediuzzaman says the following about the second part of the question, death having existence:

"Death is a discharge from the duties of life; it is a rest, a change of residence, a change of existence; it is an invitation to an eternal life, a beginning, the introduction to an immortal life. Just as life comes into the world through an act of creation and a determining, so too departure from the world is through a creation and determining, through a wise and purposeful direction. For the death of plant life, the simplest level of life, shows that it is a more orderly work of art than life. For although the death of fruits, seeds, and grains appear to occur through decay and dissolution, their death is in fact a kneading which comprises an exceedingly well-ordered chemical reaction and well-balanced combining of elements and wise formation of particles; this unseen, orderly and wise death appears through the life of the new shoots. That is to say, the death of the seed is the start of life of the shoot;

18. al-Nursî, Badî'u'z-Zamân Sa'id, *al-Makrûhât* [Arabic trans: İhsan Qasim al-Salihi], Istanbul, Sözlür Yayınevi 1992, 7 / *Mekrûbat*, 7 / *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Letters 1928-1932* [Eng. trans. Şükran Vahide], 24.

19. *Mekrûbat*, 8 / *Letters*, 24-5.

indeed, since it is like life itself, this death is created and well-ordered as much as is life.

"Moreover, the death of the fruits of living beings and animals in the human stomach is the beginning of their rising to the level of human life; it may therefore be said 'such a death is more orderly and created than their own life.'

"Thus, if the death of plant life, the lowest level of life, is thus created, wise, and ordered, so also must be the death that befalls human life, the most elevated level of life. And like a seed sown in the ground becomes a tree in the world of the air, so a man who is laid in the earth will surely produce the shoots of an everlasting life in the Intermediate Realm."²⁰

As may be seen from the above, with his flashing thought and rare insight, Bediuzzaman penetrated to the inner face of things, and took from there easily comprehensible logical conceptions and answers. He demonstrates that death has existence in a way that does not mislead.

In Bediuzzaman's view, death was the start of a new journey in life. On embarking on this, man surrenders his spirit and rises to a level of life higher and more noble than the life he knows and to which he is accustomed. Death is therefore a bridge, a passage to a more transparent life. Like a grain of wheat or a seed falling to the ground, being wetted with water, bowing to the laws of change and repair, and being subject to chemical transformation appears to one who observes it to be a rotting and corruption. But the result is not like that at all, for shoots producing myriad seeds spring forth from every seed.

Although this appears to be a rotting and dispersal, it is in fact the cause of the manifestation of a new life for the seed, scattered and lost in the darkness of the earth. If it had not been for the rotting and annihilation, the seed would not have found the way to a new life. But the rotting and dispersal which appear to be annihilation, are in reality a step to the birth of a new life.

This transformation occurring in the above way in conformity with chemical laws, shows that it is a difficult action, despite appearing to people to be annihilation. They are basically actions known as the *sunnatullah* (Divine practices) in creation, which are bound by and tied to laws. On one grain of wheat becoming hundreds of seeds, it will become food for men. In this way, it will mix in with their blood, flow in their veins, become part of their compounds and be a foundation stone in their 'buildings,' and finally become a part of their thinking apparatus and organisms. Thus, the grain is restored to life in a form higher than its first form. Its apparent destruction, which appeared to men to be death and non-existence, in reality is a return to life, and this new life is manifested in clearer fashion than the first.

The fact of a seed being restored to life is in fact nothing different to its returning to life as a human after having died. It acquires an existence very different to its previous existence. It therefore has to depart from worldly life in order to produce shoots with a new life.

Bediuzzaman reaches his intended goal with this brilliant conception, estab-

20. *Mektûbat*, 7 / *Letters*, 24.

lishing that death is an existent state. Since death is a result of the unchanging laws of change, man will be restored to life for a new existence. Doubtless, these transformations are nothing other than the existent situation mentioned in the Qur'an itself: "*He Who created death.*"

Bediuzzaman's statements on this subject have importance equal to those of both the scholars of the tenets of belief and the Qur'anic commentators. For he said that death is neither annihilation, nor destruction, nor disappearance; it is merely a transformation, a being transposed to a more perfect and higher world.

This analysis of Bediuzzaman is similar to the following lines by Abu'l-'Alā al-Ma'arī:

*Men were created to die;
Some suppose that that is the end;
But, indeed, they are transferred from the realm of works
To that of misery or happiness.*

Man feels a constant fear at the thought of death and non-existence, and he becomes the prisoner of this fear. He sees that governing in the human being are a constant destruction and decay. He is upset by this and tries to steer clear of their causes. This is apparent even when he strives on the way of truth, defends belief, and opposes falsehood.

In Bediuzzaman's view, death is the announcement of man's continued existence and the connection between his first life and the next life. He rejects the ideas that materialist philosophies spread, like its being non-existence and annihilation, which embrace man's life in the first dimension of life's journey and cause him distress by inculcating the idea of the finality of death and its being non-existence.

At the same time, Bediuzzaman's analysis of the subject has a psychological dimension, which gains for man a confidence and harmony in relation to existence, and arouses a feeling of security concerning the first and second dimensions of life. Similarly, it impresses on him that death is not a terrifying nightmare, and an end which annihilates man despatching him to non-existence. One who acquires this sense, gains a particular courage in the face of difficulties, overcoming all hardships. People certainly do not wish for death, but in reality it is a journey towards a life in which they will abide contentedly.

*But verily the home in the hereafter, that is life indeed, if they but knew.*²¹

* * *

21. Qur'an, 29:64.