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

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The Concept of the 'I' in the Establishment of Nature in Bediuzzaman's Works From the Point of View of Naturalist Philosophy

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The concept of 'natural philosophy' began to be used recently. Together with terms, which in the course of time have expressed the same meaning like 'natural metaphysics,' 'philosophy of nature,' and 'speculative physics,' it became widely used as the name of a particular discipline by the 18th century Enlightenment movement, as the equivalent of the term 'philosophia naturalis' of the Roman thinker Seneca.

In the Early and Middle Ages, there was no differentiation in Western thought between 'natural philosophy' and 'natural science.' It might even be said that the oldest theoretical works to emerge in Western thought were connected with 'natural philosophy,' or in other words, natural philosophy was the oldest discipline in Western philosophy.

The Greek word 'physis,' which is derived from the root 'phy,' was used to mean 'nature,' and includes also the meanings of producing shoots, birth, fertility-

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zation, and organic development. The concept gradually gained a richer meaning. The Sophists divided what God made¹ (created) (*physis*), into the laws made by man (*nomos*), the things he laid down as rules (*thesis*), and the things men gave form to by way of arts and crafts (*techne*). One may say immediately that this division of the Sophists is to be found in Plato, just as it was important in the formation of the thought and mentality that began with the Renaissance and has come down to the present.

Aristoteles thought of the word *physis* as the thing that kept all individual things in existence and the principle that bound everything together. It was the Stoics who first explained with *physis* "the whole or 'general nature' which included life as one of its parts within its own closed system."² Nevertheless, it also remained tied to the root of the word *physis* and continued to be understood as different to inorganic nature, animals (*zoo*) and man's spirit (*psyche*) and intellect (*logos*) and as a principle opposed to these, as an effect particular to plants.

Cicero carried over the Greeks' concept of *physis* to Rome as *natura*. According to this, *natura* was a continuous activity of birth, opening, and appearance and the source of all things' existence. Lucretius defined *natura* as i) the creative force present in all things; ii) the universe, which is created by this force; iii) things created singly; iv) the natural order.

Since no differentiation was made in either antiquity or the Middle Ages between natural philosophy and natural science, as a doctrine of *physis* (that is, nature), *physike episteme* ((natural knowledge) was a doctrine of the *cosmos* and all the beings it comprised. It was accepted that there were three different fields in this doctrine: cosmology, as the doctrine of inorganic nature; teleology as the doctrine of organic nature and organisms, that is, living beings; and psychology. However, psychology departed from the three in the 17th century. The remaining two fields or disciplines were known as physiology (in addition to natural philosophy and physics). Francis Bacon separated *historia naturalis* (empirical natural science) from natural philosophy or 'natural doctrine' (*doctrina de natura*). In the 18th century, physiology became independent of natural philosophy. In this way, the natural sciences, which in one sense were the cause of the crisis in the relations between man and nature, and in another sense were its result, were step by step secularized, and this secular natural science gradually came to be accepted as the only licit form of science. Whereas previously to the sciences separating into independent disciplines and the concept of nature being accepted as the only possible way, "God's gazing on nature was not considered as an exceptional experience, indeed, it was the normal way of look at the world."³

1. In Ancient Greece, God was not thought of as 'creative,' that is, as creating from nothing. The word 'Demiurge' was therefore used, which means 'Maker.' Whereas in Islamic thought and belief, God is both 'Creator' (*Khāliq*) and 'Maker' (*Ṣāni*).

2. König, Gert, *Doğa Felsefesi*, in, *Günümüzde Felsefe Disiplinleri*, 217. See also, Irwin, Terence, *Classical Thought*, History of Western Philosophy, I, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press 1989; Armstrong, A. H., *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*, London, Methuen 1968; Bréhier, E., *Histoire de la Philosophie*, Paris, Librairie Felix Alcan 1926, vol. i; Denkel, Arda, *Demokritos/Aristoteles* (İlkçağda Doğa Felsefeleri), İstanbul n.d.; Aristoteles Metafizik (trans. Ahmet Arslan), İzmir, Ege Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fak. Yayınları 1985, vol. i.

3. Taylor, F. Sherwood, *The Fourfold Vision*, London 1945.

The Greeks had a cosmology similar to that of other Eastern peoples in antiquity. Like the cosmos itself, that is, nature, the elements were thought of as having close ties with the gods. Since matter had spirit, it was considered to be living, and so no distinction was made between the spiritual and material. Thus, principles like *physis* (*physus*), *nomos*, *dike*, *thesis* and others, which were definitive in ancient science and philosophy, were terms which held religious meanings and therefore symbolic values. However, in time these concepts slowly lost their spiritual sense. It may be said that rather than being the forerunners of modern naturalists and scientists, the pre-Socratic philosophers were people who investigated the universal essence of existence in the abstract sense. For example, Thale's 'water,' is not the water which runs in streams and rivers, it was the 'psycho-spiritual' origin and principle of the cosmos.⁴ In other words, as the collapse of Greek olympic religion gathered momentum, the understanding of nature and its essence lost its spiritual value to the same degree, and finally was turned to Naturalism and Empiricism. It may be said that the spiritual symbolic interpretation of nature was transformed into Naturalism, and metaphysics based on inner experience, into rationalist philosophy. In short, while the philosophy in the sense that the West conceives of it emerged together with Aristoteles, in the sense that the East conceived of it, it came to an end. The Stoics and Epicurus, who followed, pursued the same line in Roman philosophy, the details notwithstanding.

Although it came from a different source, Christianity could not save itself from this general course. So much so that the excessive fondness for nature which was a Greco-Hellenistic legacy, seemed to the Christians to be a veil preventing God being gazed upon, and in consequence they aimed to reject naturalism by drawing a line between nature and the supernatural. But in so doing, its true essence, "its inner spirit," was lost to sight, and even submerged. So then, in the endeavour to save people's souls, they fell into the situation of neglecting the Divine and spiritual sense of nature, or forgetting it or attaching no importance to it. Similarly, nature being studied and investigated from the point of view of theology was not looked on favourably in the Christian West, and was neglected.

As the price of defending their own dogmas and with the aim of opposing the Greeks' 'cosmic religion,' some theologians execrated nature, calling it (*massa perditionis*).

"In order to be able to resist the danger posed by the rationalism devoid of wisdom, it put knowledge to the service of belief and denied the supernatural essence of man's innate intelligence. Only in this way could Christianity save a civilization and infuse a corrupt world with new spiritual life. But as all this happened, an alienation towards nature occurred, and this alienation made its influence felt throughout the history of Christianity. This is one of the reasons lying deep in the crisis to be observed today in the relations of contemporary man and nature."⁵

Furthermore, with the loss of insight based on metaphysics or intuitive knowledge which could penetrate to the spiritual and symbolic meanings of the cosmological sciences, cosmology turned into a cosmography. This was a departure

4. Nasr, S. H., *İnsan ve Tabiat* (trans. N. Avcı), İstanbul 1982, 65.

5. Ibid., 67.

from content or essence to manner or form. The various cosmographies of the Renaissance period started to deal with explaining not the essence of the cosmos, but its form and externals. The Copernican revolution was the final blow in this field and humanism cast man down from the throne of "the Divine form" on the face of the earth. In truth, the Copernican revolution and strengthened the Renaissance humanist and Promethean understanding. Man was not situated at the centre of the universe in medieval cosmology because he was a being bound to the world in the full meaning, but because he was "in God's form." By distancing him from the centre of everything, modern astronomy nullified the transcendent dimension of his nature. With the destruction of certain principles which had been the measure of both knowledge and reality, and with the emergence of man, bound to the world, as the measure of everything,⁶ the tendency in the West from objectivism to subjectivism commenced, which has continued down to the present day. There was no question of a metaphysic and cosmology defining the correctness and error of man's words and actions. On this basis, Descartes quite simply completed the circle by—in order to acquire certainty in knowledge—reducing through his famous method the rich variety of outer reality to pure quantity, and philosophy to mathematics. Thus, from the 17th century the cleavage between science and religion was unavoidable.

Nevertheless, the same century, Hermeticism, the Cambridge Platonists in England, and Jacob Böhme in Germany preserved their influence and power. Böhme seriously resisted the widespread mechanistic philosophy and was profoundly influenced by the *Naturphilosophie* school, but it is a fact that its influence was limited from the point of view of modern science. We see that in the 18th century the influence of science further increased. The Empiricists, Hume, and Kant (together with limiting the intellect to the phenomenal world), made Descartes' philosophy reach its logical conclusion. A philosophy of man containing no transcendent dimension was spread to the masses by means of Encyclopaedists, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot, and truth reduced to 'benefits.' It was as though the measure of man's knowledge was now benefit, and one who adopted this, was a being who had no purpose other than exploiting the bounties in the world for his own use. With the French Revolution, this exploitative and utilitarian understanding directed all attention to the empirical sciences, and the last traces preserving the influence of an understanding of nature based on contemplation were removed, and the new mechanical science strengthened. With the advent of this new science, one single way remained to man: "To lay hold of nature, dominate it, and utilize it in the service of man, an animal decked out with analytical reason and thought."⁷

Although particularly in the fields of art and literature, the Romantic movement attempted to oppose the 19th century materialist understanding of nature, form close ties with nature and restore its spirit, it was more emotional than mental, and therefore remained only a movement limited in extent. Novalis, the

6. The relativism and subjectivism of the prominent thinker of Ancient Greece expressed by the saying: "Man is the measure of everything" is also relevant here.

7. Nasr, *İnsan ve Tabiat*, 89.

English poets Wordsworth and Keats, Vogel, Schelling, Franz von Baader, and so on, may be mentioned here.

In short, the following passage by Titus Burckhardt is a summary of what I have attempted to explain so far:

"The sun-centred system bears a clear symbolism, for it situates the light-source at the centre. However, Copernicus' rediscovery of this system did not bring any new spiritual view. It was in fact the popularization of an esoteric truth to a dangerous extent. The sun-centred system has no shared aspect with people's subjective experiences. Religious belief has no organic place in this system. In place of pointing out to man's intellect the ways it could surpass itself and ensuring the evaluating of everything within the extraordinariness of the cosmos, it merely opened up the way to a materialist Prometheanism which was not even human, let alone superhuman."⁸

I have attempted to describe natural philosophy under its main headings in very general and brief fashion. Besides being one of the main fields of philosophy, it has been a factor in the establishment of the other fields of philosophy. Moreover, it is a question of its being a fundamental, strong connection between the fields of philosophy that cannot be dispensed with, a mutual influence. In order to explain these philosophical fields, we may take one in particular, and focussing on a concept and subject of this field, follow philosophical thought. I think that following this method, we may pinpoint Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's approach to philosophy and his view and interpretations of it; in short, those aspects of it he accepted or refuted. It is my view that making the Thirtieth Word from his important work *Sözler* (The Words) the basis of this article or paper, an attempt may be made to develop this in the above way.

In Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's words, the Thirtieth Word "explains the talisman of creation by solving an important talisman of the All-Wise Qur'an," and is "an explanation of the 'I' or ego (*ene*) and minute particles (*zerre*), to the extent of an *alif* and a 'point.'" And its aim is to explain "the nature and result of the human 'I', and... the motion and duties of minute particles." But it is the 'I' or ego that is concentrated on. In order to facilitate the understanding of this, we may hold for a moment in our minds the 'I' as existence or being and minute particles as object (or atoms). But I shall use the word 'I' (*ene*) as it is used in the treatise so that we may determine correctly what Bediuzzaman wanted to say.

In order to establish the word, or concept, of the 'I', Bediuzzaman makes verse 72 of Sura al-Ahzab his starting point:

*We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it being afraid thereof. But man assumed it; indeed, he is most unjust, most foolish.*⁹

Bediuzzaman states that "The 'I' is one component, one aspect, of the numerous aspects of the 'Trust,' from the bearing of which the sky, earth, and mountains shrank, and of which they were frightened." He explains the 'I's historical origins and existential position with an allegory:

8. Burckhardt, T., *Cosmology and Modern Science*, 184-5, as in Nasr, 99-100.

9. Çantay, Hasan Basri, *Kur'an-ı Hakîm ve Meâl-i Kerîm*, 13th ed., İstanbul 1404/1984, ii, 757 ff, especially p. 122 fn.

"From the time of Adam until now, the 'I' has been the seed of a terrible tree of Zaqqum and at the same time, of a luminous tree of Tuba, which shoot out branches around the world of mankind."¹⁰

He says that in one respect the 'I' is "the key to the Divine Names, which are hidden treasures," while in another respect it is "the key to the locked talisman of creation; it is a problem-solving riddle, a wondrous talisman." Thus, if we can grasp and comprehend the nature of the 'I', "that strange riddle, that amazing talisman, is disclosed, and it also discloses the talisman of the universe and the treasures of the necessary world."¹¹ "For while being apparently open, the doors of the universe are in fact closed."

It will be appropriate to recall here that the 'nature' of Meister Eckhart, who played a preparatory role in the transition from Medieval scholasticism to the 'New Age' (1453-1789) Renaissance, was fundamental to the 'New Age's' natural philosophy's description of nature as a book spread open before us for us to read. This German mystic thinker's efforts to comprehend nature in this way demonstrated itself from the mystical point of view in Nicolas Cusanus, Paracelsus, and Jacob Böhme, and to an extent was source of a pantheistic development in Giordano Bruna and Baruch Spinoza.

By progressing from the concept of the 'I' to attempting to explain the universe, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi was expressing a very different idea. Although at first glance it appears that man is the focus of this concept of the 'I', on following the train of thought that he developed, it is seen he is saying something very different. It will therefore be useful for us to follow this development further without immediately coming to any conclusion.

Since the doors of the universe are closed despite appearing to be open, how can we understand the reality of 'nature'? We know now that he is trying to make the 'I' the answer to this question. But how should we understand the 'I'? Indeed, what is the 'I's' nature? The following passage is very meaningful here:

"God Almighty has given to man by way of a Trust, a key called the 'I', that is such that it opens all the doors of the world; He has given him an enigmatic 'I' with which he may discover the hidden treasures of the Creator of the Universe."¹²

However, "the 'I' is also an extremely complicated riddle and a talisman that is difficult to solve." But, "when its true nature and the purpose of its creation are known, as it is itself solved, so too will be the universe."

Thus, however necessary it is to attempt firstly to understand the 'I' (in 'New Age' (1453-1789) natural philosophy it was proposed that nature was understood first), it is necessary to the same degree to follow a different way in doing this. For, "The All-Wise Maker gave to man as a Trust an 'I' which comprises indications and samples that show and cause to recognize the truths of the attributes and functions of His dominicality."¹³

10. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Sözler*, İstanbul, Sinan Matbaası 1960, 502 / *The Words* [Eng. trans: Şükran Vahide], Sözler Publications 1992, 557.

11. *Sözler*, 502 / *The Words*, 558.

12. *Sözler*, 502 / *The Words*, 558.

13. *Sözler*, 502 / *The Words*, 558.

Being such, the 'I' has to be "a unit of measurement" or unchanging scale so that "the attributes of dominicality and functions of Divinity may be known." "However, it is not necessary for a unit of measurement to have actual existence. Rather, like hypothetical lines in geometry, a unit of measurement may be formed by hypothesis and supposition. It is not necessary for its actual existence to be established by concrete knowledge and proofs."

Even if we accept all this, we may still ask: "Why is knowledge of the attributes and Names of God Almighty connected to the 'I'?" Bediuzzaman replies to this as follows:

"Since an absolute and all-encompassing thing has no limits or end, neither may a shape be given to it, nor may a form be conferred on it, nor may it be determined; what its quiddity is may not be comprehended. For example, an endless light without darkness may not be known or perceived. But if a line of real or imaginary darkness is drawn, then it becomes known. Thus, since God Almighty's attributes, like knowledge and power, and Names, like All-Wise and All-Compassionate, are all-encompassing, limitless, and without like, they may not be determined, and what they are may not be known or perceived. Therefore, since they do not have limits or an actual end, it is necessary to draw a hypothetical and imaginary limit. The 'I' does this. It imagines in itself a fictitious dominicality, ownership, power, and knowledge: it draws a line. By doing this it places an imaginary limit on the all-encompassing attributes, saying, 'Up to here, mine, after that, His;' it makes a division. With the tiny units of measurement in itself, it slowly understands the true nature of the attributes."¹⁴

In other words, with its imaginary lordship within the bounds of its own authority and power, the 'I' understands the Creator's lordship over the realm of contingency; with its apparent ownership, it understands the true ownership of its Creator. It ascribes ownership of the universe to the Creator. That is, it is possible for it to understand God's all-embracing knowledge through its partial knowledge, and "the originative art of the Glorious Maker" with "its small amount of acquired art." In short, contained within the 'I' are "thousands of mysterious states, attributes, and perceptions which make known and show to a degree all the Divine attributes and functions." In Bediuzzaman's words,

"The 'I' is mirror-like, and, like a unit of measurement and tool for discovery, it has an indicative meaning; having no meaning in itself, it shows the meaning of others. It is a conscious strand from the thick rope of the human being, a fine thread from the raiment of the essence of humanity, it is an *alif* from the book of the character of mankind."¹⁵

The 'I' has "two faces." One of these "looks towards good and existence. This characteristics makes the 'I' capable of receiving effulgence, that is, good and luminosity. However, this capacity "accepts what is given; it does not have the power to give existence to anything, or to create. As posited in the ancient Greek understanding, the 'I' is not defined as being without beginning or end, absolute, or prime mover. It certainly bears no resemblance to Aristoteles' first cause and

14. Sözlür, 502 / *The Words*, 559.

15. Sözlür, 504 / *The Words*, 559.

at the same time, final cause, or in short, to his absolute form. Bediuzzaman's characteristic thought shows itself here: his reinterpretation of the relationship between God's absolute creativity, which Islam teaches, and the 'I', which is created. This is an interpretation of the relationship between God's act of creation and determining, which is discussed in Islamic thought in the fields of *kalām* and philosophy, and man's will and conduct, while remaining firmly bound to the principles of Islamic belief. It is also a solution for these in one sense.

Bediuzzaman states that the 'I' is not active, "it does not have the ability to create." However, "its other face looks to evil," and this means that it goes to non-existence. The real nature of the 'I' "shows the meaning of things other than itself." "It is a sort of scale or measure, like a thermometer or barometer, which indicates the degrees and amounts of things; it is a measure that makes known the absolute, all-encompassing and limitless attributes of the Necessary Being." One who knows his true nature to be thus, and acts accordingly, will be saved and rise to a high degree. Furthermore "he truly carries out the Trust, and through the telescope of his 'I', he sees what the universe is and what duties it is performing. And when he obtains information about the universe, he sees that his 'I' confirms it. This knowledge will remain as light and wisdom for him, and will not be transformed into darkness and futility. ... it attains the rank of 'the Most Excellent of Patterns.'"¹⁶

But if, by contrast, "forgetting the wisdom of its creation and abandoning the duty of its nature, the 'I' views itself solely in the light of its nominal and apparent meaning, if it believes that it owns itself, then it betrays the Trust."¹⁷ "It was of this aspect of the Trust, therefore, which gives rise to all ascribing of partners to God, evil, and misguidance, that the heavens, earth, and mountains were terrified; they were frightened of associating hypothetical partners with God." An 'I' in such a position cannot escape betraying the wisdom and purpose of its existence, and is therefore in absolute ignorance. In Bediuzzaman's words:

"Even if it knows thousands of branches of science, with compounded ignorance it is most ignorant. For when its senses and thoughts yield the lights of knowledge of the universe, those lights are extinguished because such an 'I' does not find any material within itself with which to confirm, illuminate, and perpetuate them. Whatever it encounters is dyed with the colours that are within it. Even if it encounters pure wisdom, the wisdom takes the form, within that 'I', of absolute futility. For the colour of an 'I' that is in this condition is atheism and ascribing partners to God, it is denial of God Almighty. If the whole universe is full of shining signs, a dark point in the 'I' hides them from view, as though extinguished."¹⁸

Up to here I have attempted to depict in very general lines the concept of the 'I' which Bediuzzaman Said Nursi discusses in the Thirtieth Word, part of his superlative and packed work *Sözler* (The Words). What appears is this, that it may be said that this concept is possibly a thought system for establishing areas of philosophy such as metaphysics, natural philosophy, man and ethics, the

16. *Sözler*, 504 / *The Words*, 559.

17. *Sözler*, 504 / *The Words*, 559.

18. *Sözler*, 505, 108-116 / *The Words*, 559, 133-6.

theory of knowledge, and so on. Moreover, it may be said that focussed in Bediuzzaman's concept of the 'I' is an approach different to the efforts to establish these areas, which emerged from the fierce debates of ancient Western philosophies, and even those of the Middle Ages and 'New Age.' It may be comfortably asserted as a result of comparisons and discussion of the subject in the context of Eastern and particularly Indian philosophy,¹⁹ that Bediuzzaman formed a self-contained, coherent, and total thought structure. This supports us in considering Islamic thought even in the 20th century to be flowering in the person and interpretations of Bediuzzaman. Doubtless, this is an important characteristic showing the close relationship between the views which Bediuzzaman tried to develop both in this subject and in other elements making up Islamic thought, and those of Islamic thinkers of the past and present. It is hoped that forthcoming research will broaden the horizons of our thought. It seems that these passages which I have quoted from Bediuzzaman will be the source of much varied debate and philosophical interpretation:

"It is the origin of sheer worship. That is to say, the 'I' knows itself to be a bondsman. It realizes that it serves one other than itself. Its essence has only an indicative meaning. That is, it understands that it carries the meaning of another. Its existence is dependent; that is, it believes that its existence is due only to the existence of another, and that the continuance of its existence is due solely to the creativity of that other. Its ownership is illusory; that is, it knows that with the permission of its owner it has an apparent and temporary ownership. Its reality is shadow-like; that is, a contingent and insignificant shadow that displays the manifestation of a true and necessary reality. As to its function, being a measure and balance for the attributes and functions of its Creator, it is conscious service. It is in this way that the prophets, and the pure ones and saints who were from the line of the prophets, regarded the 'I', they saw it in this regard, and understood the truth. They handed over the sovereignty to the Lord of All Sovereignty and concluded that that Lord of All Glory has no partner or like, neither in His sovereignty, nor in His dominicality, nor in His Divinity. He has no need of assistant or deputy. The key to all things is in His hand. He has absolute Power over all things. They also concluded that causes are but an apparent veil; Nature is the set of rules of His creation, a collection of His laws, and the way in which He demonstrates His power.

"Thus, this shining, luminous, beautiful face is like a living and meaningful seed out of which the Glorious Creator has created a Tuba-tree of worship, the blessed branches of which have adorned with luminous fruits all parts of the world of humanity. By scattering the darkness of all the past, it shows that that long past time is not a place of non-existence and a vast graveyard as philosophy would have it, but is rather a radiant garden and a place of light for the luminous souls who have departed this world, who have cast off their heavy loads and remain free. It is a luminous, many-runged ascent and an orbit of lights for passing souls in order that they may jump to the future and eternal felicity."²⁰

19. For Indian thought and beliefs, see, Zimmer, *Hint Felsefesi* [trans: Sedat Umran], Istanbul, Ruh ve Madde Yayınları 1992; Kadir, C. A., *İslâm Öncesi Hint Düşüncesi* [trans: K. Demirci], in *İslâm Düşüncesi Tarihi*, Istanbul, İnsan Yayınları 1990, vol. i.

20. *Sözler*, 506 / *The Words*, 562.