

## An Islamic Perspective of the Natural Environment and Animals: Said Nursi and his Renewalist Philosophy

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### Abstract

Contemporary Muslim scholar Said Nursi's (1877-1960) view of animals is highly spiritual. His positive thinking philosophy extends to the natural environment and includes animals considered harmful to humans. His view of not killing harmful animals contradicts with the majority Islamic scholarly works which permit the killing of detrimental ones. His understanding of the interconnectedness of natural beings and things as well as their connection to the Divine is the major source for his works. Nursi views each created thing as a piece of the puzzle of the universe in harmony with each other. To him, animals have a deep spiritual aspect alongside their physical dimension. This article argues that throughout his works, Nursi – with his unique perspectives on spiritual approaches towards the environment and devotion to the creation – more than any other Islamic scholar, defended the Islamic view against naturalists and attempted to Islamicize natural philosophy by addressing theists. He views nature as art not the Artist. This article examines Nursi's positive thinking and actions towards animals as he presents a renewed interpretation of Islamic sacred sources.

*Keywords:* Islam, Said Nursi, positive thinking, animals, renewal, environment, philosophy.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Said Nursi's approach to animals emphasizes the spiritual more than the material aspects of the natural world. Nursi's philosophy of positive thinking<sup>1</sup> and acting extended to the environment and animals, including those considered harmful to humans. This interest and compassion extended to all the creatures he encountered from dogs to ants (Vahide, 2005). He viewed animals as servants in the palace of the universe, conforming with complete obedience to the creational commands and displaying perfectly the aims of their creation. He says, "animals glorify and worship God by carrying out their duties in a wonderful fashion through obedience and conformity with His divine power" (Nursi, 2005, p.365). This is one of the reasons Nursi did not harm animals, including mice, snakes and mosquitoes. He defended "the rights of flies to live" (Leaman in Abu Rabi 2003). Nursi not only cared for and respected animals but avoided using degrading names for them. He treated domestic animals with compassion, respect and honor. Nursi would not refer to the donkey by its name of *eyek* in Turkish, because it is used as an insult between people. Instead, he called the donkey *işlek*, which means 'hard worker' as a way to honor the donkey for carrying goods. He even considered ill-speaking towards dogs as gossip. He viewed animals as blessed creatures. Nursi's compassion was not limited to animals. He also felt great sorrow at the speedy destruction of spring flowers and even pitied those delicate creatures (Nursi, 2013). He says,

*I was staying on the top floor of the famous Shebir Hotel (in Afyon). The subtle and graceful dancing of the leaves, branches, and trunks of the many poplar trees in the fine gardens opposite me at the touching of the breeze, each with a rapturous and ecstatic motion like a circle of dervishes, pained my heart, sorrowful and melancholy at being parted from my brothers and remaining alone. Suddenly the seasons of autumn and winter came to mind and a heedlessness overcame me. I so pitied those graceful poplars and living creatures swaying with perfect joyousness that my eyes filled with tears (p.314).*

Nursi held that everything in the universe, living and inanimate, worships God in its own manner and is therefore blessed, hence making it immoral to kill without reason. Accordingly, his view called for sensitivity towards animals. Following the Shafi'i School of Jurisprudence makes him very vigilant since Imam Sha'fi (767-820) and his jurisprudence are "the most attentive to the wellbeing of non-human animals compared to other schools of law," as Tlili argues (Tlili in Glave & Kristo-Nagy 2015, p.228).

Nursi was born and raised in a small village where he lived intimately close to the natural world. As a young man, he would travel long distances by foot or sometimes by horse. Nursi would reflect on the universe, or macrocosm, through observing the natural world from the ants to the stars. When he was sent into exile in 1925 by the secularist government in Ankara, Nursi found himself alone in the distant village of Barla where he was forbidden to communicate with people. Secluded, he devoted his time to reflection and contemplation in the nearby woods and mountains. Nursi was "always investigating, questioning and seeking answers" (Vahide, 2005, p.12). Despite the loneliness, "Nursi credits this time of his life as being very precious" (p.260). It was the key era for the inspiration and development of his views on the natural world as reflecting the attributes of the Divine. His connection and esteem to plants, animals, insects, lakes and other natural beings grew significantly, as can be seen in his works. This connectedness

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<sup>1</sup> In Islamic sources, positive thinking is defined as *husnu'l zann*, though the meaning of that Arabic expression is broader. It encompasses good intentions, thought and action towards God, the universe and humans. It also conveys the meaning of optimism and of holding good opinion and thinking well about others. See Salih Yucel, 2014. 'The Notion of "Husnu'l Zann" or Positive Thinking in Islam: Medieval Perspective,' *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* Vol. 4, No. 6:101-12.

is a natural effect of spending more time in nature. Researches show that feeling connected to nature produces many benefits, such as promoting more positive and less negative moods.<sup>ii</sup> This explains how Nursi developed positive thoughts towards the natural world during the difficult time of his exile. Through experimental investigation, Beatson and Halloran's research findings show the attitudes that "people hold towards animals improve when they are reminded of the fact that humans and animals are creatures alike." When someone has such feeling, he/she treats animals better (Beatson and Halloran 2007, p.619). Nursi's loneliness only intensified his feelings of compassion towards different creatures, even if they were considered disliked, such as mice, flies and snakes. His deep spiritual experience in this regard led him to see them as displays of God's arts and recognize their connectedness to the universe, especially to humans.

Humans, on the other hand, were the microcosm and each human was understood to be a miniature universe. Like Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), Nursi viewed everything in the universe as connected to one another, just as every organ in the human body is connected and works together. The deeper a person's understanding of the macrocosm (also known as the book of the universe), and the microcosm (the human being),<sup>iii</sup> "the greater their degree of positive thinking" (Yucel 2014, p.106). Nursi can be called a theocentric scholar not an anthropocentric one. He looked upon each created thing as a piece of the puzzle of the universe, with the pieces in harmony with each other. He argues

*"the reality of every being [including animals] is based on one Name or many ... Indeed, one group of the most learned of the saints stated that ... apparently as many as twenty manifestations of the impresses of the Divine Names may be seen on a single living creature" (Nursi, 2005, p.656).*

Accordingly, each creation, including animals and insects, displayed God's art. He spent much time reflecting on surrounding insects and animals, and their world, drawing many lessons that he passed on to his students. He saw the power of mercy in the hen's protection of her chicks, the importance of cleanliness in the manners of the cat and the cooperation displayed in ant colonies.

Nursi's compassionate treatment of animals and insects was not only a case of his positive thinking philosophy in practice, but also an example of his constant awareness of God's presence. This is *ihsan*,<sup>iv</sup> the highest level of spirituality, in which a person acts knowing that "God is always observing" as mentioned in the hadith (Bukhari cited in Nasr, 2002). This degree of positive thinking and action may be too idealistic for ordinary people. However, I argue that, by thinking and acting in such a way, Nursi is not just teaching about animal rights, but also reviving the spiritual dimension of the treatment of animals, which is now being neglected in the Muslim world compared to its state before the nineteenth century. Foltz argues (2006, p. 21-22) that "in general sense, one could say that the main stream Islamic legal tradition accords more rights to non-human animals than do the legal system of contemporary west." He continues (p.5), "Taking the long view of history; an average non-human animal might have preferred to

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<sup>ii</sup> See Robert E. Hoot & Harris Friedman, 2011. 'Connectedness and Environmental Behavior: Sense of Interconnectedness and Pro-Environmental Behavior', *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 30, 1-2; 89-100. Mayer, Stephen F & Frantz, Cynthia. M. 2004. 'The connectedness to nature scale: A measure of individuals' feeling in community with nature', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 24 No.4, :503-15. Kals, E., Schumacher, D., & Montada, L. 1999 'Emotional affinity toward nature as a motivational basis to protect nature', *Environment and Behavior*, 31: 178-202.

<sup>iii</sup> According to Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) a human is a microcosm of the universe. See William Chittick, "Ibn Arabi", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/ibn-arabi/> (accessed June 6,2015)

<sup>iv</sup> *Ihsan* means perfection, excellence and doing thing beautifully by being aware that God is constantly watching. It is based on hadith which indicates 'To worship God as if you see Him, and if you cannot achieve this state of devotion then you must consider that He is looking at you'. (Bukhari, 50) <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/2/43> (accessed March 6, 2017)

live among Muslims than among Christians.” He thinks that (p. 21) “the conduct of Europeans in the nineteenth century and onward has greatly conduced to produce negative impact in regard to animal treatments in the Muslim world.” However, due to negligence of animal rights in the modern day, an animal will prefer to live in the developed countries rather than Muslim dominant countries, because “since the colonial and postcolonial period, compassion and legal protection of animal have been disregarded and sometimes cruelty conducted” as Mikhail argues (2014, p,68-83). He cites many Islamic sources in regards to how the Muslim world venerated animals before colonialism including “dogs that were known to roam freely around Medina, and some were reported inside the Prophet’s Mosque” (p.68).

In this article, I will examine Nursi’s approach to animals and his compassion towards the natural world including animals from three points of view: (1) Not only did Nursi believe in the interconnectedness between all creation in the universe, but he saw animals as a part of the whole macrocosm; (2) Animals have a deep spiritual dimension along with their magnificent material dimension, making each animal a ‘sign’ pointing to the Creator; and (3) Every animal is believed to be God’s gift which can be benefitted from within its particular purpose.

These three points will be examined through reference to his works and the accounts of his close students, beginning with a few examples of his actions in regard to animals. It is essential to look at examples from Nursi’s life as it demonstrates his philosophy in action and strengthens his arguments as he practices what he teaches.

## 2.0 NURSI’S TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

There are many incidents in Nursi’s life where his interactions with animals have been noted as being extraordinarily compassionate. He was seen giving breadcrumbs to ants.<sup>v</sup> In one instance, his younger brother Mehmed brought him some food. Nursi left the crumbs and smaller pieces to the ants and ate the rest. When he was asked why he did this, he replied, “I have observed that they have a social life and work together diligently and conscientiously, so I want to help them as a reward for their republicanism” (Nursi, 1996, p.36). On another occasion, Molla Hamid recalled a time when they were staying at Mount Erek in early winter. Nursi asked the student to build a hut or room made out of wood to protect against the cold. When excavating the necessary areas, Molla Hamid and some other students who were there came across an ants’ nest. When Nursi saw this, he told them to cease working in that area. When the students asked for a reason, he said, “Would it make sense to destroy a home in order to make a home?” (Sahiner, n.d, p.34).

In one instance, when Nursi stayed at a house and saw a mouse coming out of its hole, he said, “Look! It wants something to eat!” and then proceeded to put a piece of food by the hole, which the mouse would eventually eat. This became such a habit that people knew, if he had any food, he was “bound to put a part of it for the mouse” (p.150). He would repeat this with cats and birds, leaving bread where they could reach it (p.141). Once when his student, Tahsin Aydin, saw Nursi giving food to a mouse, Nursi said to him, “This mouse is teaching me some lessons” (p.10). He would not allow his students kill snakes when walking in the bush (p.32).

Nursi had a cat he would care for. While staying at his brother’s house in Van, his brother’s wife Rabia saw that the cat had sullied her prayer mat. She hit the cat once or twice. The cat disappeared and did not return, and neither did Nursi who was staying at the mosque that night.

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<sup>v</sup> All Arabic and Turkish sources are translated by the author

The next day, Nursi's student was supposed to come by the house to get breakfast for his teacher, but he did not appear. Rabia asked her husband to take the food on his way to the mosque where he was a teacher. When he went to the mosque, he saw the cat there. Nursi smiled and said, "What did Rabia do to the cat? Did she hit it? It came to complain to me. Both the cat and Rabia are guilty in their own way, but I forgave both of them" (p. 47). The cat did not return to the house again and stayed by Nursi's side. There is an idiom in Turkish for cats, *nankör kedi*, or the ungrateful cat who denies the giver. This is due to the cat's seemingly unfaithful nature to the one that feeds it. Nursi views it quite differently. To him, a cat is not an ingrate, not acknowledging the giver, but an intelligent creature that knows the True Giver (God) and is loyal to Him only.

As evident in these examples, Nursi went beyond caring for animals: he honored them for their abilities, economy, solidarity and spiritual dimension. This honor extended to animals considered harmful to humans, as he was certain of the wisdom in their creation and undiscovered potential. Otherwise, he would not be able to stand firm in the presence of wolves, construct a dwelling place around ant nests or avoid killing mosquitoes. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "We can judge the heart of man by his treatment of animals" (Clayton, 2008, p.v). Nursi's treatment of the natural world was part of his strong convictions in his faith and deep understanding of the spiritual nature of the world.

Through his kind treatment of animals, Nursi was not introducing something new, but reviving the principles of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), saints and scholars in Islamic history. Such examples are mentioned particularly in Sufi sources. In his book *Ihya Ulum ad-Din* (The Revival of Religious Sciences) Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) mentions many stories about the kind treatment towards animals by the Prophet, his companions and great scholars. Farid ud-Din Attar's (1145-1221) work *Mantiq ut-Tayr* (The Conference of the Birds) explains the different spiritual stations of the birds. The renowned Sufi leader Baha ud-Din Naqshiband (1318-1389) would stand up in respect when cows and horses passed him by in the streets (Kabbani, 2004).

Taneja mentions (2015) stories of how Sufis treated animals in India, noting they were venerated. Their approaches to animals are unlike the approaches by ordinary human beings. Just as a biologist and veterinarian have a deeper understanding of how animals' physical features are different than the average person, similarly prophets' and saints' spiritual outlooks and treatment of animals are distinctive and sometimes may not be objective. Their philosophy in the treatment of animals and insects is based on *wara'* (abstinence), which is the peak of *taqwa* (piety) rather than *azimah* (strictness or strict law) that everyone has to do or *rukhsab* (dispensation or concessionary law), an exception to a general law. It can also be said they act according to their high degrees of *taqwa*; therefore, their actions may sometimes contradict traditional scholars' fatwas (non-binding but authoritative legal opinion for ordinary Muslims).<sup>vi</sup> Tlili argues (in Glave & Kristo-Nagy 2015,) that "Muslim scholars' works of zoology adopt a combined rational and spiritual approach to animals as the scholars are motivated by their faith and influenced by the Qur'an." In that vein, Nursi fuses spirituality with the treatment of animals in his works. It appears his treatment of animals contradicts religious rulings that permit the killing of harmful

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<sup>vi</sup> Some Western scholars take the literal meaning of Qur'anic verses or hadiths and then argue that by being vegetarian or not killing harmful animals contradicts with the sacred text of Islam. In my view, they do not look the literature on this issue particularly exegetical works and commentary of hadiths in details. Consuming meat and killing harmful animals are not obligations in Islam. Also, these vegetarian or semi-vegetarian Islamic scholars do not rule against eating meat or killing harmful animals as unlawful. It is their personal choice and due to their degree of piety.

animals. Although Nursi did not consider himself to be Sufi,<sup>vii</sup> his approach can be likened to the Sufi saints and reflects his degree of piety.

### 3.0 ANIMALS PART OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF UNIVERSE

The universe functions as one complex system. Understanding this system has been the life passion of countless scientists, scholars and researchers. Much focus has been on the material aspects of the universe, whereas Nursi sought to understand its spiritual aspects. He maintained the universe is an integrated creation with “all its members in harmony with one another” (Nursi, 2005, p. 90). He held that everything in the universe, including animals, is connected to a great degree, speaking not only from a theoretical point of view but also a personal one. He believed and acted upon this interconnectedness to the extent that it became ingrained in his way of life. This reflects his degree of “nature’s connectedness, a measure of how much a person sees nature as part of their identity” (Shultz in Schmuck & Schultz 2002, p.62).

Particularly during his exile, Nursi would seek solace in nature and spend days or weeks away from his place of residence, to contemplate the reality of the universe in his preferred places in nearby mountains or woods. He treated animals with an honor others might give to a human. Nursi avoided disrupting animals and harming them. He did not remove animals or insects for his convenience, seeing them as part of the world he was in, and discouraged his students and friends from causing any harm.

He cared for “the rights of flies to live, saying no creature was created aimlessly, so flies should not be harmed or killed in vain” (Yucel and Sivri, 2009, p.94). Moreover, he viewed animals and insects as a part of the “Book of the Universe,” his definition of the environment from a spiritual perspective. This term means everything in the universe holds wisdom in its creation and needs to be ‘read’ and understood. Animals are also ‘God’s officers’, each fulfilling its given duty. They glorify God in their own form of worship. Rifat Barutcu recalled a time when he was trying to chase flies out of the house, but Nursi did not allow it because it was cold outside. Nursi added, “They already have a short life span and will die soon, so they are my night companions” (Sahiner, n.d, p. 27). He did not allow his students to use any type of insecticide.

Nursi saw animals as a necessary part of the universe, cooperating just like the organs in a body cooperate with each other. Just as nothing in the human body is purposeless or created in vain, he extended that purposefulness to all animals as well. They form part of the balance of the world, adding to and subtracting from it in meaningful ways. He understood the aim of all created beings, including animals, is to present to “God’s gaze the perfections of His art, the embroideries of His Names, the embellishments of His wisdom, and the gifts of His mercy; it is to be mirrors to His beauty and perfections” (Nursi,1996, p.340).

### 4.0 NURSI’S MANA-YI HARFI AND MANA-YI ISMI EXEGESIS

A major Nursian concept is the two faces of the universe. The first face, *mana-yi harfi*, looks to the Creator, while the second face, *mana-yi ismi*, looks to itself (Ozdemir n.d). *Mana-yi harfi* is seeing creation and praising how beautifully it has been made by the Creator, while *mana-yi ismi* is “seeing a creation and being amazed by its beauty in itself” (Nursi, 2005, p.147). For Nursi, every

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<sup>vii</sup> Said Nursi does not consider himself to be Sufi and sometimes is critical to Sufism. See Said Nursi, 2009. *The Flashes*, trans. Sukran Vahide, (Istanbul: Sozler Publications): 216. Said Nursi, 2007. *The Letters*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications) 518-536.

being has a meaning and function in the wholeness of creation, but does not have a meaning in the universe if it exists on its own and only looks to itself. For example, if one looks at a work of art on its own and does not realize it is Van Gogh's, the art will have little value. Similarly, "if one looks at creation knowing it as art made by God, it holds immeasurable value" (Yucel and Sivri, 2009, p.81).

When applied to animals, in the face of *mana-yi harfi*, they reflect the Divine Names and a part of the universe. In the face of *mana-yi isim*, the animal is beautiful or resourceful on its own, but its connections to other creatures or the universe are left unrecognized. This decreases the rank and value of the animal. The first face recognizes a bee as a productive creature that aids in the pollination of plants, which enables the survival of many species, while the second face recognizes a bee as a creature of several colors that flies around.

Islamically, humans will be called to account for transgressing upon the rights or wellbeing of animals as they are created by God. As God's officers and artwork, they have value as a result of their connection to God (*mana-yi harfi*), so humans must respect that connection and treat animals accordingly. When applied, this ideally would prevent abuse of animals through honoring them as manifestations of God's Divine Names.

Nursi would regard each animal beyond its face value and through its spiritual dimensions as well its relations with its surrounding environment. For example, when discussing the bee, he described it in the following terms:

*The instant life enters it, it establishes such a connection with the universe as though it concludes a trading agreement with it, especially with the flowers and plants of the earth. It can say, 'The earth is my garden and trading house' (Nursi, 2005, p.524).*

Nursi would not discriminate between small insects and large animals. Regarding their displaying the art of God, he considered all creation equal. While animal protection groups strive to save whales or other creatures, no one strives in the same manner to save flies or ants. This is Nursi's key difference and indicates a unique factor in his concept. For him, "the flower and stars are equally significant in all their aspects and importance" (Nursi, 2009, p.328).

Many times, throughout his works, he strongly refutes that this harmony could be ascribed to accident, causality or the inherent power and intelligence of the universe.<sup>viii</sup> For Nursi, everything in the universe is a manifestation of God's Names. Just as there is unity and harmony between God's Names, there is harmony between God's creations that reflects those names.

"The Creator manifests twenty Divine Names in every creation", according to Nursi (2005, p.660). The connections and harmony between these names necessitate a connection between all creations. Nursi expounds the connection between the Names and their manifestation in creation as follows. First, God gives the creation a form, shape and proportion, manifesting the Divine Names of Giver of Form, Determiner and Orderer. God knows how to adorn the created because of His complete knowledge and understanding of the created, reflecting His Names of All-Knowing and All-Wise. Following these, the created is adorned and beautified according to its necessities and the will of God, reflecting His Names of the Maker and Designer. The beauty and adornment given to the created embodies God's favor towards His subjects, displaying His names of the Gracious One and Munificent One, for He could not have created his subjects without beauty and harmony. More than favoring His creation, God loves it,

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<sup>viii</sup> For detail information see: For detail of Nursi's argument against naturalists see: Said Nursi, (2009) *Flashes*, trans. Sukran Vahide, Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 232-50.

granting it beautiful flowers or lovable children, reflecting God's names of Loving One, Compassionate One and Bestower of Bounties. Throughout this process, God demonstrates four other Names: The Merciful, Gentle, Beautiful and Perfect. His creation is a mirror of those names as He creates with those Names. He concludes this process with granting life and the provisions for life, displaying His Names of Giver of Life, Ever-Living and Self-Subsistent One (2005). With so many Names in the Creation, God is the Known One.

Nursi prescribed a specific way of regarding animals. A person should first see animals as a manifestation of God's names and amazing forms of the Divine art. By viewing animals this way, a person can come to understand the existence and Unity of God. The cooperation and interconnectedness between different species, plant and animal, clearly demonstrates their having one Master.

## **5.0 ANIMALS ARE BELIEVED TO BE GOD'S GIFT TO HUMANS TO BE BENEFITTED FROM WITHIN ITS PARTICULAR PURPOSE**

Nursi's positive views of other creatures stems from their description in the Islamic primary texts, the Qur'an and Sunnah. In the Qur'an, there is a clear description of the purpose of the natural world: "He has also made of service to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth; all is from Him (a gift of His Grace). Surely in this, there are (clear) signs for a people who reflect" (45:13).

With a predetermined purpose, each creation is like a Divine official, existing to carry out its duty. For Nursi, scavengers, such as ants, constantly clean the land, taking apart and consuming rotting bodies of other creatures. This makes them health officials charged with the task of sanitation by God.<sup>ix</sup> Their duties contribute to the harmony in the universe, preventing filth from lying around too long (Ayduz, n.d.). Similarly, though he does not give specific examples, he states "the same cleansing system keeps the oceans free of pollution" (Nursi, 2009, p.341).

Based on Nursi's works, humans could benefit from animals in three aspects. First, humans can use the physical aspects of animals, such as by harvesting the honey, consuming the meat and using them as beasts of burden or travel. Second, humans can reflect on animals as God's art and manifestations of His Names. Nursi uses animals to further his knowledge and understanding of God, making even the most insignificant or disliked animal an object worthy of contemplation. The founder of Qadiri Sufi Order Abdu'l Qadir Jilani (1077-1166) says (n.d.) that "truly and deeply contemplating animals and their abilities would lead to understanding the miraculous aspect of God's art, the perfection of His power and unlimited knowledge, and the essence or core of wisdom." This will be explained in more detail in coming sections. Third, science lessons can be drawn from the world of animals as it is done from observing the universe. They were not just creatures running about on their own business, but beings who have many lessons to offer humankind. On this issue, Nursi is influenced by great Sufis. Qur'anic exegete Ismail Haqqi (1652-1725) holds that "animals offer lessons that take the learner from ignorance to understanding and wisdom" (Haqqi, n.d.).

Their abilities, activities, way of life, social structures and spiritual dimensions deserve a deeper understanding and offer benefits in return. For example, Nursi gives as an example the

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<sup>ix</sup> Researches show that ants play very important role on cleaning rotting bodies of other creatures. See [Animal Behaviour](#), Lise Diez, Jean Louis Deneubourg, Lucie Hoebeke, Claire Detrain. 2011. Orientation in corpse-carrying ants: memory or chemical cues? *Animal Behaviour*, Volume 81, Issue 6: 1171–76, Nigel R Franks, James Hooper, Catherine Webb, Anna Dornhaus. 2005. Tomb evaders: house-hunting hygiene in ants, *Biology Letters*, Volume 1, issue 2. DOI: 10.1098/rsbl.2005.0302



distribution of tasks among bees, resulting in the beautiful and purposeful honey. He praises the stealth of the small mosquito, which manages to draw blood from humans, gigantic in size compared to the mosquito, without drawing attention. He applauds the cat, which is often seen as an ingrate by people for not becoming attached or remaining loyal to the person who always feeds it. Nursi saw cats as loyal, not to the humans who are ‘tray bearers’ of the food, but loyal to God, the Provider of the food.

Finally, Nursi points to the word ‘gift’ in the verse (Qur’an, 45:13). If humans were to see animals as gifts, their treatment of animals would be kind and their feelings of gratitude would increase. If a great king or queen were to give a small gift to a regular citizen, that citizen would feel happy for three reasons. First, the citizen would feel that they are being honored. Second, that citizen would hold the small gift in high esteem, increasing the value of that gift and using it carefully. Third, the citizen would consider the intention or purpose of the gift. Humankind should view animals in a similar manner, which can lead to a sense of honor, increased gratitude and a desire to further examine and explore the creatures, including harmful or disliked creatures.

## **6.0 ANIMALS’ SPIRITUAL DIMENSION ALONG THEIR MATERIAL DIMENSION**

Nursi’s compassionate view of nature and animals stems from the sacred sources from which he was inspired. Nursi would spend much time, days, weeks or even months, contemplating in the woods, forests, caves and tree tops, looking at the stars and observing processes in nature and the effect of time. Beyond focusing on the physical domain alone, he discovered and experienced the spiritual dimension of animals, the aspects of them that served as ‘signs’ pointing to the Creator and displaying their connection to the rest of the universe.

Nursi focuses on the close relationship between mankind and nature. To him, nature has two aspects: the relative one that is perceived by humans, and the essential one that looks to God. Every act of nature is beautiful in essence, or beautiful with regards to its results, making its beauty relative (Nursi, 2005). He gives the example of thorns, which humans perceive as harmful and ugly, but they serve their duty as protectors of the plant, making it beautiful in essence (p.241). Likewise, animals that seem harmful or terrifying in the aspect that looks towards humans, are nevertheless beautiful and appealing in essence because they are displays of God’s art. Nursi formulated these two aspects in the ‘New Said’<sup>x</sup> era, after his experiences in World War I that traumatized him.

Nursi’s high opinion and protection of animals was a result of spiritual experiences and the deepening of his connection with God. It can be argued his discovery of the metaphysical dimension of animals and resulting attitudes towards them shows his esoteric knowledge. He listened to the chirping of the birds and took from them lessons that would shape his belief. His compassion encompassed insects dying due to cold weather as he felt sadness over their passing.

Although he was not a vegetarian, he ate little meat, particularly during the era of New Said. By consuming little meat, it can be argued that Nursi followed the Sunnah (tradition) of “Prophet Muhammad who is considered ‘semi-vegetarian’” (Ali,2015, p.272). Nursi preferred eggs as a sufficient protein source, regarding them as a substitute for meat.

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<sup>x</sup> A categorisation of Said Nursi’s life into the ‘Old’ and ‘New’ has now been standardised in his biographies as between 1924 and onward till he died as historiographies.

To understand Nursi's views regarding the spiritual dimension of animals, it is necessary to thoroughly examine related texts in the Qur'an and Sunnah as Nursi based all his views on these primary sources. As is custom when analyzing an Islamic text, it is essential to look at what major exegetes before Nursi wrote regarding the topic.

The Qur'an states there are signs of God's presence in all creation. Everything is guided by Him, everything praises Him (17:44), and all the animals who live in communities (6:38) like humans praise Him. To understand the meaning of this particular verse, it will be examined in light of Islamic scholarship by classical and prominent Qur'anic commentators. In his exegesis, al-Tabari (838-923) refers to a hadith where Prophet Muhammad says, "Everything glorifies God in its own tongue (disposition)." Major exegetes agree that "each creation praises God in its own manner, while some exegetes say only creation with souls can glorify God" (al-Tabari, n.d.). Zamakhshari (1070-1143) supports the former view (n.d.). Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi (1149-1209) held that "every living being is obliged to glorify God. Glorification requires language, knowledge and comprehension. Non-living entities, such as rocks and soil, are not included due to the lack of the three conditions" (ar-Razi, n.d.).

Al-Qurtubi (1214-1273) interpreted the verse literally and stated everything glorifies God. While he acknowledged both interpretations rising from this verse, he preferred the first one because it is the literal and clear meaning of the verse (al-Qurtubi n.d.). Ibn Kathir (1301-1373) referred to a saying of the Companion, Abdullah ibn Masud, who stated he heard the food he was eating with Prophet Muhammad and even the pebbles he was holding glorifying God. This is listed as a prophetic miracle (Ibn Kathir, n.d.). Sulami (n.d.) (d.1106), al-Qushayri (n.d.) (986-1074) and Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) supported the first view of everything praising God (Ibn Arabi, n.d.). While many Qur'anic commentators support the first view, they differ on how everything glorifies God. Ismail Haqqi also supports the first view and he states "humans, angels and jinn glorify God with their tongues, while other parts of creation, living and non-living, perform it through their disposition" (Haqqi, n.d.). Nursi followed the view of the majority and accepted that everything invokes God's name through its disposition, which may include the tongue and heart.

The verse (17:44) is among the most repeated verses in Nursi's works and is often the beginning of his correspondence with his students and friends. He took the verse to mean that 'each creature glorifies God in its own manner, through "the tongue of disposition"' (Gulen, 2007, p.39). Nursi viewed the purring of cats as a type of glorification.

Nursi held that all animals were proclaiming, silently and out loud, "There is no god but He," (Nursi, 2013, p.159) which is the creed of belief. To him, birds were singing odes dedicated to God, thanking their Maker and Provider. He viewed "the earth as a vast place of invocation and expansive assembly for the proclamation of God's glory" (p.159). "Insects offer supplication to God, asking for provisions and God accepts their plea by providing", according to Nursi (2005, p,81-2). This is the spiritual value he places in animals, which he later uses to defend the power of supplication, regardless of who uses it.

By focusing on the spiritual dimension of the universe including animals, Nursi is refuting the philosophy of naturalists who argue that an assembly of causes bring objects into existence. He states:

*Indeed, since beings exist and this cannot be denied, and since each being comes into existence in a wise and artistic fashion, and since each is not outside time but is being continuously renewed, then, O falsifier of the truth, you are bound to say either that the causes in the world create beings, for example, this*

*animal; that is to say, it comes into existence through the coming together of causes, or that it forms itself, or that its coming into existence is a requirement and necessary effect of Nature, or that it is created through the power of One All-Powerful and All-Glorious. Since reason can find no way apart from these four, if the first three are definitely proved to be impossible, invalid and absurd, the way of Divine Unity, which is the fourth way, will necessarily and self-evidently and without doubt or suspicion, be proved true (Nursi, 2009, p.234)*

To him, causes are not intelligent and can be destructive. If the assembly of causes brings things into existence, then each object, even atoms and particles, need to have infinite knowledge and power. He argues, “If one architect is not accepted, then every brick must have full knowledge of the design” (p.235). Nursi’s views causes as ingredients for the creation to happen. They are not the Creator or Originator. He says, “by accepting that nature necessitates it and makes it” (p.236) is the rejection of God. If animate creatures are not ascribed directly to the arts of God, each has to be a god with infinite. This would lead to transferring divine attributes to physical matter. Instead of accepting one God it ends accepting gods as many as the existence of atoms in the universe.<sup>xi</sup> He says “nature is art, not Artist. It is an embroidery, and cannot be the Embroiderer.... It is a body of the laws of creation, and cannot be the Lawgiver” (p.244). Nursi argues that so animals are the art of God and they reflect some divine attributes. They must be not viewed just as a natural object but also spiritual beings.

The combination of modern animal rights activism with the spiritual dimension of Nursi’s positive thinking and action towards animals is a powerful union, with the two parts benefitting from the other, leading to improved treatment of animals particularly in the Muslim world. For Nursi, to think and act in such a positive and idealistic manner can be said to be a modern interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunnah. He read and understood the Book of the Universe and acted within them accordingly.

Nursi’s view of and actions towards other created beings are highly idealistic. It is unlikely the greater population can reach his degree of positive thinking and compassion towards animals. His religious opinion that people should not harm even a creature that poses a grave danger to them is highly idealistic and therefore is not universally applicable. Even though he addressed this opinion to all religiously conscious people, it might only be possible for the spiritual elite and enthusiasts to put it into practice. His view of not killing harmful animals contradicts with the majority Muslim scholarly works which permit to kill the detrimental ones. Although it varies from country to country, in almost all Islamic jurisprudence works, scholars mention the permissibility of killing of animals and insects which are harmful to human and economy such as snake, wild boar, wolf, fox, mice, mosquito, scorpion, latrodectus etc. Since Nursi was semi-vegetarian, his philosophy of animals can be seen imperfect for those who never consume meat. Also, due to strong spirituality in his philosophy regarding animals, he can be considered as a scholar who addresses theists only and therefore, not universal.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

Nursi’s positive attitude towards animals, even those that are potentially dangerous to humans, shows the degree of his compassion and spiritual station, a level that may not be reached through knowledge and emotion alone. The combination of radiance of the heart, light of the mind and potential of the soul can lead humans to experience the metaphysical realm and attain

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<sup>xi</sup> For detail of Nursi’s argument against naturalists see: Nursi, *Flashes* 232-44.

a deeper truth, the truth behind the “veil of causes”. Nursi experienced a union of these three dimensions, which forever changed his views on life, death and the afterlife. This had a profound effect on his actions and works. He would honor animals with great respect, refraining from harming even a fly and teaching others to do the same. Nursi had his students cease their hut construction in winter three times because they were unknowingly building on ants’ nests.

His view of the interconnectedness of all beings meant, when all the birds and insects chirped, he heard not a cacophony but a symphony. Just as the coming together of letters brings about a word with meaning, it is through their connection to one another that Nursi believed animals gained spiritual meaning. Their roles as God’s officers added to their spiritual value, which lead Nursi to protect their physical value. Completing their trio of value is the animals’ manifestation of the many Divine Names. They are the artwork of the glorified Maker and express this through their own manner of glorification.

Nursi viewed all beings, from the stars to the ants, as interrelated and connected like the links of a chain, so when one link is harmed, the whole system is harmed. All creatures act as mirrors that reflect God’s Divine Names to show humankind the path to understanding the Glorified Maker. Therefore, from Nursi we can understand that to respect and protect all animals is to respect God. By proclaiming the spiritual value of animals and insects, he addressed the conscience of religious and spiritual people.

Seeing the Muslim world in physical and spiritual crises, Nursi wanted to revive the Islamic spirit comprehensively, including the aspects that looked towards the natural world and other creatures. He came to recognize and understand the physical and spiritual reality of creation through using the tools of the heart and mind, including spiritual contemplation, compassionate philosophy, logic and the sciences. He acted according to the extent of his understanding of reality and asked others to do the same. To him, disregarding the environment meant disrespecting the Creator.

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