

**FREE WILL VERSUS BELIEF IN *QADR?*
THE RESPONSE OF SA'ID NURSI AND ITS
MODERN RELEVANCE**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol23no1.4>

Abstract

The need of modern man requires more practical answer from religious perspective to support them in facing rapid changes and high demands of life. The issue of human will which is the most important and fundamental foundation to the concept of responsibility and morality is still open to discussion and debate. This paper aims at exploring the view of a reformer of Islam, Badiuzzaman Sa'id Nursi in his 26th Word of his *Risale-I Nur*. Rather than having the discourse in a purely theological method, Nursi demonstrates it in a synthesis manner and suitable with modern man. The issue which is normally brought as juxtaposed with the concept of absolute will of God is dealt with in a harmonious way and suitable to all readers. Other than the phenomenological approach to the ontology of solving the relationship between God's power and human will, Nursi also brought in very remarkable explanation about good and bad and how human should deal with them. Through-out his explanation, Nursi came with interesting illustrations and therefore successful in explaining the issue effectively. This suits his status as a reformer of Islam who came to shed lights on crucial issues with modern approach.

Keywords: Free will; *qadr*; Sa'īd Nursi; good and evil; modern relevance.

Khulasah

Keperluan manusia moden menuntut lebih banyak jawapan dari perspektif agama yang praktikal untuk membantu mereka menghadapi perubahan yang cepat dan tuntutan yang tinggi dalam kehidupan. Isu kehendak manusia yang merupakan permasalahan dasar dan asas yang paling penting bagi konsep tanggung jawab dan moral masih lagi dibincangkan dan diperdebatkan. Makalah ini bertujuan meneroka pendapat seorang tokoh pembaharu Islam iaitu Badiuzzaman Said Nursi melalui tulisannya di dalam 26th Word dari *Risale-I Nur*. Nursi tidak menggunakan pendekatan ilmu kalam tetapi menjelaskan dengan cara yang santai dan sesuai untuk semua pembaca. Selain daripada pendekatan fenomenologi terhadap isu ontologi untuk menyelesaikan hubungan di antara kuasa Tuhan dan kehendak manusia, Nursi juga membawakan penjelasan yang amat berkesan tentang kedudukan baik dan buruk dan bagaimana manusia patut menanganinya. Sepanjang penjelasan beliau, Nursi mendatangkan kisah-kisah yang menarik dan seterusnya berjaya menjelaskan sesuatu isu dengan berkesan. Penjelasan terhadap isu-isu yang penting dengan menggunakan pendekatan yang bersesuaian dengan zaman moden ini bersesuaian dengan kedudukannya sebagai seorang tokoh pembaharu Islam.

Kata kunci: Kebebasan kehendak; *qadr*; Sa'īd Nursi; baik dan buruk; kesesuaian dengan zaman moden.

Introduction

The problem of human will and God's determination has been an important, yet problematic issue across religions

as well as philosophy.¹ Muslim theologians primarily contribute to the Theocentrism that looks at God with His attributes of perfection, namely Omniscient and Omnipotent. Theological discussion in Islam, as was noted by Izutsu,² revolves around God. God has been the conceptual pivot around which everything takes their theocentric characteristics. However, more than just being a conceptual convenience, God is real and has real imprints on man's existential concerns.

This discourse has brought to the concerns about man's free will, accountability, and responsibility, where the stream of Theocentrism is seen to face some problems. The most major one is proceeding from God as the central point of departure seems to clash with the concept of human freedom, free will as well as responsibility. Since if man is not the author of his actions, he is not free. And he cannot be accounted for all his actions - and the concept of rewards and punishment would collapse altogether.

This is supported by quite consistent understanding across the available discourses – at least, perhaps, within the classical discourses in the formative periods of Islam – that God's decree is juxtaposing to man's free will. And this has been so for centuries, with minor reiterations, oscillating between two standpoints – either God's decree is ultimate and man's will is subservient or man has an ontologically distinct will and God's is limited.

The issue of gap and discrepancy in the Muslim theological discourse is highlighted by Montgomery Watt: "The Muslims come close to the Kantian formula 'Ought implies Can'. It would be unjust for God to punish men for acts for which they were not responsible, they deduce

¹ 'Irfān 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Fattāḥ, *Dirāsāt fī al-Firaq wa al-'Aqā'id al-Islāmiyyah* (Amman: Dār al-Bashīr, 1997), 252.

² Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Quran* (Selangor: Islamic Book Trust, 2002), 1.

that if God commands men, e.g. to believe, it implies that they are able to believe. The statement that 'they all deny that God imposes duties on a man which he is not able for' could be rephrased as *taklīf* implies *qudrah*', 'imposition of duty implies power'.³ Therefore, more detail scrutiny must be done to really understand different concern in each of the views.

Other than purely theological discourses, the issue is important to formulate foundation to the moral system. Alasdair MacIntyre articulates of the problem faced by religious ethics, that there is a need for finding recourse for debates on ethics to pre-modern theories, for what is available are incommensurable theories, underlined by merely the will-to-power and, therefore, are susceptible to the objectification of subjective preference.⁴ And Islamic ethics does stand to offer clear framework and the issue of human will still become a topic of debate with remarkable disagreement rather than providing consistent answer.

This article aims at delving into this vital topic of discourse in Islam on the relationship between the Will of God and the will of man, with a specific recourse to the thoughts of Badiuzzaman Sa'id Nursi. More specifically, this paper is an analysis of Nursi's positions based on the 26th Word, a section within his *Ṭalāsīm*. The issue also brings in the problem of 'evil' which is another issue that received a lot of attention. The relevance of his solution to modern understanding is also dealt with in this article.

An Overview on Early Discourses on God's Will and Human Free Will

In Islam, the Qur'an comes to certain pivotal points, that is, God's absolute Power and Will is the substratum of everything. None will happen without his Will. Among

³ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴ Brad Kallenberg, *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after Macintyre* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 21-50.

the verses with the message are: "Allah is the Creator of all things, and He is the Guardian and Disposer of all affairs",⁵ "Every single thing is before His sight, in (due) proportion",⁶ "But Allah has created you and your handwork".⁷ On the other hand, it is also obvious throughout the Book that humans make choice and responsible of his good and bad deeds.⁸ Some examples are: "Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds;"⁹ "But those who have earned evil will have a reward of like evil".¹⁰ The problem at hand is, these two standpoints are seen to be contradictory. This conflict has been existent across available discourses, especially within the classical discourses in the formative periods of Islam and pointing to the conclusion that God's decree is seen to be in contrast with man's free will.¹¹

Tracing the root of the problem of human free will and predestination will bring first to the doctrine of Fatalism. The first taken-up fatalistic standpoint of life in Islam emerged more as political reason where claims are made by the authorities upon the legitimacy and rights of their rule during the reign of the Umayyad Empire. Their argument was that God had chosen them and garlanded them (i.e., the Umayyad) with the "*khilāfah* and guidance".¹² The corollary of such claims is that to disobey the caliph or his agents is a refusal to acknowledge God and is tantamount to unbelief. This was

⁵ Al-Qur'an 39: 62.

⁶ Al-Qur'an 13: 8.

⁷ Al-Qur'an 37: 96

⁸ See; 76: 30; 18: 29; 6: 104.

⁹ Al-Qur'an 74: 38.

¹⁰ Al-Qur'an 10: 27;

¹¹ William M. Watt. "Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam," *The Muslim World* vol. 36 (1946), 124-152.

¹² William M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2002), 83.

during which the school of Jabarites was taking its root and acknowledged in the tradition of Islam.

The imbalanced stance of Jabbarites with its official acceptance during the Umayyad period is one of the natural reasons for the rise of Qadarites. Qadarites, is usually attributed to Ma‘bad al-Juhānī, Ghaylān al-Dimashqī and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.¹³ Earlier in its lifetime, Qadarites was largely political in its motive - to subvert the rule of the Umayyad. However, approaching the ninth century, when the Umayyad caliphate was replaced by the Abbasids, Qadarite school has freed itself from political motives and assumed a much more intellectual characteristic – genuinely concerned about matters of faith.¹⁴ Qadarite school is known with its doctrine that gives human beings their whole responsibility for their actions with the slogan “Human beings are the creator for their actions.”¹⁵

The arguments presented by the heterogeneous groups of Qadarites were later adopted and refined by the Mu‘tazilites. The Mu‘tazilites took up more from the intellectual than the political form of Qadarites. The strategy was to adopt the philosophical arsenals provided by Greek thoughts to use it against both Christians and Hellenic philosophers in facing the challenges of other religious and tradition thought before they directly involved with the political regime and coming to the school’s end.¹⁶

¹³ In later discourses, the association of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī with the Qadarism is rather doubted. See Alexander Treiger, “Origins of Kalam”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

¹⁵ Hanifi Özcan, “Human Freedom: From the Point of View of Knowledge-Object Relationship,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* vol. 7 (1996), 1–15.

¹⁶ Massimo Campanini, “The Mu‘tazila in Islamic History and Thought”, *Religion Compass* vol. 6 (2012), 41-50.

The Mu'tazilites generally upheld the view that human beings are to be responsible of their actions to support the concept of retribution. However, in getting to the conclusion, the proponent leading members came with each of their detail resolution. Al-Nazzām's view, for instance, postulated that there are two considerable moments in man's actions. The first moment is the internal aspect of the act, which is the internal decision of the commission or omission, and the issuance of that decision to the body; the second moment is the actualization of the decision in the physical sphere. In other words, the two moments are the division in the intervals of actions before the actions come into being. And that man has agency in the first moment to act in the second moment.¹⁷ This purely intellectual operation has not been appreciated because it came under the label of human freedom which is seen to clash with God's unlimited power, will and knowledge.

The first mainstream school of Islam was the Ash'arite school. In the theory of Ash'arite *kasb*, al-Ash'arī's primary mission is to maintain God's attributes as unshaken doctrine of faith, in opposing to the Mu'tazilites. God is the Creator of everything, including human actions – and that He is the Real Agent, nevertheless, cannot be ascribed to the accountability of what man does. Although He creates his actions, He cannot be ascribed through these acts. The question of human responsibility is accepted as a postulate.

The theory of *kasb* is schematically into three divisions. And the understanding of this theory is based on the understanding of the relationship between three elements:¹⁸

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁸ Binyamin Abrahamov, "A Re-Examination of al-Ash'arī's Theory of *Kasb* according to Kitāb al-Lumā," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* vol. 121(2) (1989), 210-221.

- i. God's creation of man's action;
- ii. God's creation of man's power (*quwwah*) for appropriating this action, and;
- iii. Man's appropriating the action created for him by God (*iktisāb*).

Al-Ash'arī states that God creates the action simultaneously with His creation of the *quwwah* for *iktisāb*. In fact, this is the definition of *kasb* given by al-Ash'arī which states: "that the act proceeds from its appropriator (*muktasib*) in virtue of a created power (*bi quwwah muḥdathah*)". Therefore, he regards the *quwwah muḥdathah* as a necessary condition for the occurrence of the act.

In the first place, al-Ash'arī's main concern was to establish God's omnipotence as a point of departure from his dissatisfaction over the Mu'tazilite's doctrine. Therefore, the final conclusion of this epistemology though considered by majority of the Muslims as the mainstream teaching of Islam, usually highlighted by analytical studies as weighing towards determinism, the point that is on the school.

The latest school, al-Māturīdī came with the concept of free will which is traced from the relationship between *al-irādah* (will), *al-ikhtiyār* (choice) and *al-qudrah* (power). Another additional concept would be the concept of *kasb*, but the operational definition of the concept *kasb* here is that of the Mu'tazilites. The proper approach to understand the concept of *kasb*, then, is only a comparative way, in the sense that al-Māturīdī was trying to answer the theory.¹⁹

In detail, al-Māturīdī firstly affirms a primary truth which is everything aside from God is created, and

¹⁹ Meric Pessagno, "*Irāda, Ikhtiyār, Qudra, Kasb* the View of Abū Maṣūr al-Māturīdī," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* vol. 104(1) (1984), 177-191.

everything is, then, a "*shay*". Therefore, man, including his actions, are God's creations and do not have ontological independence if not actualized by God's creative action. This is followed with *al-irādah* and *al-ikhtiyār* as self-evident facts. The freedom of human choice is established on the basis of one's consciousness of his self, the denial of which is self-contradictory, for to deny it is itself a proof of an act of voluntary rebellion. A person wills his act freely and he is free in his choice.

Though al-Māturīdī's solution is considered to carry the strongest synthesis, it still seems to carry several problems. The most obvious one is that though the choice is operative within a definite limitation, beyond which his act is not free in its truest sense. This limitation is both existential and moral. Existential because improper acts go against the calculations made by his reason and tendencies of his heart. Meanwhile, it is also moral because going against the standards of morality is not directing proper actions to proper objects. Additionally, both are not mutually exclusive.

The classical discourses have always been between God's perfection, in His will and power, and, on the other hand, is human responsibility and agency. As is seen above, the arguments of al-Ash'arī and al-Māturīdī have been to establish the omnipotence of God, while the question of human responsibilities are reconciled more or less successfully. Undeniably, however, a more convincing solution is still awaited especially in representing Muslims in general, rather than one theological school and not the other. Issues posed by modern ethics need to be addressed.

The problem of human freedom and its relationship to belief in *qadr* has been one of the main issues in the discourse of modern thinkers. Jamaluddin Afghani (1839-1897), Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and Shibli Nomani (1857-1914)

emphasize on the centrality of human agency as the ingredient for a successful society. There is basically a serious need for a clear understanding of belief in *qadr* in order not to give the understanding of Islam as a religion of fatalism.²⁰

Hence, despite being issue that is widely discussed, it still needs attention especially by looking for solutions that suit the current needs of human beings. In order to meet the concern, this paper will explore the thought of Badiuzzaman Sa'id Nursi, a scholar who is acknowledged to be significant in the development of Islam in Turkey.

Sa'id Nursi's Background

Said Nursi's genealogy can be traced back to a clan of Kurdish family. He was born in the small village of Nurs, in the province of Bitlis in Eastern Turkey, Isparta, sub-province of Hizan.²¹ The year was in 1877, in a mountain village in eastern Anatolia.²² According to the Rumi calendar, he was born in 1293 which was 1877 in the Ottoman Empire.

The meaningful epochs of Nursi's life generally began shortly after the First World War, and at the end of the Ottoman Empire.²³ It was recorded that Nursi was a profoundly religious man.²⁴ He was first involved in Islamic renaissance in the early part of his life (1876-

²⁰ Mazheruddin Siddiqi, "General Characteristics of Muslim Modernism," *Islamic Studies* vol. 9(1) (March, 1970), 35-37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

²² Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi ed., *Islam at the Crossroads on the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), ix.

²³ Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Said Nursi: Makers of Civilization* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2009), 23.

²⁴ Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 17.

1896) and with this historical context; he turned into a fundamentalist activist.²⁵

It is further known that Nursi and his generations living in Bitlis were influenced by the then outstanding characteristics of the troubled era they were going through, and this placed them at the terminus of a chain reaction of social change. This movement was set in motion in the West and finally reached Eastern Anatolia. The main purpose of this movement was communication which had connection with the centre, government services, education, and conscription.²⁶

It has been also discovered that Nursi's official biography states that his first political life began in Mardin which can be referred to as Nursi's first attempt to rally Muslims to work together for the greater glory of Islam.²⁷ Nursi was a founder of the Muslim association known as the *Ittihad-i Muhammedi* (The Muslim Union). The association was established a week before the military rebellion in Istanbul which has acquired notoriety in Turkish history as the "incident of March 31st" 1909.²⁸

Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi proclaims that Nursi has played an inevitable role in his lifetime. Nursi's career and writings consist of different significant outcomes. For instance, it provides deep insights into the history of the post-Tanzimat period in the Ottoman Empire, the predicament of the traditional class of the '*ulamā*', the failure of the Islamic reform movement of the nineteenth century to provide 'an Islamic solution' to the intrusion of Westernization, the deep philosophical and political reasons behind the rise of secular nationalism in Turkey,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 5.

²⁸ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 42.

the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, and the state of religion in Kemalist Turkey.²⁹

Besides, it is expounded that without any gainsaying, Sa'īd Nursi, in many ways a distinctive figure, was an original thinker and scholar whose important contributions to contemporary Islamic thought are now being recognized in the Islamic world.

The Phenomenology of Free Will: An Epistemological Approach

Sa'īd Nursi has written some analytical points on this complex issue in a very diplomatic way, in the sense that neither positions – God's intolerable omnipotence and human free will – are affirmed at the expense of the other. One of the works is *The Twenty-Sixth Word*, under which the topic "Divine Determining and the Power of Choice" is discussed elaborately.

As introductory remarks, the first point is that Nursi asserted that belief in God's decree is of ultimate importance in Islamic belief system by using the term of the 'furthest limit' of religion. This is, perhaps, to suggest that this is not a simple matter and that the tools of comprehending and discussing about it must be equally complex as well, but not necessarily by purely theological solutions. Furthermore, an early stance is already asserted, that God's Omnipotence must, in no way, be compromised which consequently affirms all of its implications which include the question of Divine Destiny and human free will. Here, a continuation of Sunnite thoughts can be discerned in his system.

The next point of remark, which is, believing in Divine Determining as the 'highest point' implies that a belief in this matter is a matter of ultimate importance to a Muslim which means to believe is to consciously opt to hold on to the idea. A direction of the discussion is already

²⁹ Abu-Rabi, *Islam at the Crossroads*, 3.

alluded to, that the relationship between the two is far from being a contradiction. They, however, relate to each other perfectly and that one serves as an ontological corroboration to the other.

At this point, it is already a reply to some claims adopted by the modernists and his contemporaries, many of whom are antagonists to Nursi's treatises, who claim that believing in God's decree would lead to a state of fatalism and that Muslims will thoughtlessly surrender their fate to God, relieving themselves of any efforts to improve their lives and acquire worldly goods.

The 26th Word is divided into five different topics. Each topic addresses different aspects of the same theme, 'On Divine Determining'. Nursi begins his discourse by saying that this problem is an aspect "a belief pertaining to state and conscience" (*min imān ḥālī wa wijdānī*) which should be sensed by all as the highest point achieved in *Islām* and *Imān*. To him, although the problem relates to *Imān*, it is not, however, theological in a sense that it can be discussed merely through logic and theoretical sophistication. Therefore, it is not a content accessible thoroughly and solely through mental exercises, but through the state of being and experience. In other words, to affirm the reality of God's decree and human will, one needs to look inside his self deeply to know that, from the point of view of one's own being and his existential experience, one does, indeed, have the power of choice. Again, it can be observed here that Nursi extends al-Māturīdī's arguments on the impossible provability of free will through discursive reasoning.

This is reinforced when he continues to explain that "they are not theoretical and do not pertain to knowledge" (*laysa min al-masā'il al-'ilmīyah wa al-naẓariyyah*)³⁰ and repeated it again in another paragraph "they are not

³⁰ Said Nursi, *al-Ṭalāsīm*, trans. Masood Nuri Yilmaz (Istanbul: Dar al-Sanabil al-Dhahabiyah, 2011), 96.

matters pertaining to knowledge which might give rise to such actions that are opposed to the mystery of Divine Determining”,³¹ letting the readers not to hope for a full explanation on the relationship through making use of discursive reasoning, and also to the two pitfalls into which such reasoning might lead – fatalism and absolute voluntarism.

He brings two examples of the extreme moral implications that can result from the insolvability of the discourse merely through reason: “evil-commandeering souls clinging to Divine Determining in order to clear themselves of the responsibility of the evils they have committed, and their becoming proud and conceited on account of the virtues bestowed on them and their relying on the power of choice,” which is directly opposed to the actual aim of believing in it in the first place, which is to nurture humility towards God for one’s moral qualities and self-accountability for one’s wrongdoings.

If this problem cannot be solved by reason and that insistence on making use of it would inevitably result in doctrinal pitfalls, then how are we to approach the matter at hand? Nursi believed, as is being alluded to in the beginning, that it is through our state of being and existential experience (*ḥālī and wijdānī*) – in other words, phenomenology of self and action– that some light can be shed on the issue. Put differently, a Muslim must explore his existential construct to understand the workings of the human will *in lieu* with the Divine Determining and consequently affirm its reality. In Nursi’s terminologies, man has only ‘secondary will’ (*al-ikhtiyār al-juz’ī*).³² This

³¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

³² The phrase *al-ikhtiyār al-juz’ī* has been translated into “the power of choice” which is sufficient for general understanding. But for further understanding of Sa’id Nursi’s treatment of God’s determining and human choice the word *al-juz’ī* is highlighted and translated into ‘secondary’.

makes Nursi's discussion to be attractive to all readers from all walks of life.

According to Nursi, the first thing that a Muslim need to believe is that he or she should submit his self and actions, even the consequence to God. But this does not mean that he or she is not a responsible agent. The interplay between these two aspects is explained in the following paragraph:

"Two aspects of a belief ... a believer attributes everything to Almighty God, even his actions and self, the situation retains as it is till (*istamarra 'ala hadhihi al-hāl*) finally the power of choice confronts him, so he cannot evade his obligation and responsibility." "then Divine Determining confronts him (*thumma yatasadda lahu*) so that he does not become proud at his good deeds and his achievements (*al-ḥasanāt, wa al-faḍā'il wa al-kamālāt*), saying: "Know your limits; the one who does them is not you."³³

Another strong point made by Nursi is that goodness only comes from God and that evil is solely a human product. This can be summarized into several points as his early conclusions. They are: (1) God's Will and human will do not oppose each other, but the former corroborates the reality of the latter, and; (2) only goodness comes out as a product of God's will because to Him is *al-qadr*,³⁴ and evil is a product of human will – although, perhaps not exclusively in a sense that man may also will goodness.

³³ Sa'id Nursi, *al-Ṭalāsīm*, 95.

³⁴ In Arabic, the word *qadr* means exact measurement, which implies thorough planning, which implies, in turn, all-encompassing knowledge, which ultimately implies absoluteness. Therefore, by the very term used, it can mean that the will of God is absolute.

There are more in the first part, in which he explains the corroborative ontological relationship between God's will and human will, elaborating on the origin of goodness and evil,³⁵ the nature of Divine Justice,³⁶ the necessity for man to protect himself from his own evil,³⁷ the rightfulness of Divine Quality³⁸ and the sinfulness of the substantial realness of the self.³⁹ However, all of these will be made more sensible and coherent with the overall thoughts of Sa'id Nursi when we consider and analyse the Second Topic (*al-Mabḥath al-Thānī*) first.

The Reconcilability of God's Free Will and Man's Free Will: A Phenomenological Ontology of Free Will

Moving into the second topic is a list of seven arguments for the reconcilability between God's will and human will in the standard dialectical form of "*qīla wa qultu*". Nursi specifies that this part is to address scholars in particular. The first argument appeals to *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, which states that one's ignorance of the compatibility between the two realities does not necessarily mean that they are incompatible.

Secondly, Nursi resorts to a convenient distinction represented by the familiar two most basic questions that can be asked of anything: "*Hal huwa?*" (Is it?) and "*Mā huwa?*" (What is it?), each representing existence and essence respectively. The fact that one does not know the nature of an existent does not mean it does not exist. Again, through our existential experience, we 'feel' the realness of our will.

Thirdly, Nursi states that Divine Determining is one kind of knowledge within the Divine Knowledge (*naw' min 'ilm al-Ilāhī*). Where Divine Knowledge relates

³⁵ Sa'id Nursi, *al-Ṭalāsīm*, 96.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

(*yata'allaq*) to our will in a sense that it serves as the substratum of our will, Divine Determining must also relate to our will in a similar sense and not in a nullifying way.

Fourthly, he addresses the relationship between knowledge and its correspondents, i.e., the objects of knowledge in the external world. That these objects are not in any way be held swayed by knowledge. Any changes in knowledge do not effect on these objects. Instead, it is the reverse that is true. Because the ontological link for the real objects is between itself and will, not knowledge. It is will that imprints changes in objects, not knowledge.

In addition, God's knowledge is that of eternity. Therefore, there is a need in Nursi to qualitatively define what it means by 'eternity'. Eternity is not past, present and future attaching to each other and form a timeline stretching between the two ends - past and future. This kind of conception would render our understanding of sequences of events as consequential.⁴⁰ Instead, 'eternity' is past, present and future held together as a whole which 'is'⁴¹ simultaneously. In which case, the relationships between the three are not consequential, but discrete. Cognizant of this structure is only God, and we, being limited in perception, see things as consequential and, therefore, fatalistic.

⁴⁰ By consequential, both its temporal and causal nuances are meant. Temporal, in that things and events are not precedents or antecedents of each other. And causal, in that things and events are not cause and effects of each other.

⁴¹ For the lack of a better word, the word '*is*' is chosen, but is written in italic. Perhaps the closest equivalent of the word in place is 'occurs'. But 'to occur' is a verb unique to events - which are only a category which the mind comes out with, having no substantive reality. While, here, Nursi is describing past, present and future not as events, but as 'things'. As things, they do not merely happen, but be.

This is representable by the metaphor of a mirror overseeing all of its reflections at once from above. Man's mirror is held low; therefore, it cannot reflect objects that are outside of its covered area. Meanwhile, God's mirror is like a huge mirror, held above everything else, reflecting everything in its covered area. For that, to God the past, present and future are all happening at once. Meanwhile, man sees it in a sequence.⁴²

Fifthly, Divine Determining has a relationship with causality. In which case, the link that connects everything cannot be disentangled. Therefore, if a man is destined to die from a bullet, then every working of the world will converge to the closest point of that event - say, the pull of the trigger of a rifle. But, if the trigger is not pulled, then, again, the first argument is put in place. We simply do not know what will happen - either the man continues to live or he will also die but with a different cause. In any case, God causes things and events to happen through human actions which man himself chooses to act out.

The sixth argument discusses will as something empirical (*amrun i'tibari*). That which is empirical is not subject to the laws of causality. Therefore, it does not require any cause for its existence, nor it is influenced by anything external. Its existence is issued forth from man himself and its choice is that of man's. Only things that are externally real (*wujūdun khārijīyyun muḥaqqaq*) that are related to necessity and causality. If, however, one considers one's own will as something externally real, then the principle of philosophy "if a thing is not necessary, then it may not be" (*mā lam yajib lam yūjad*) applies. Then, the human will cease to remain.

The seventh argument relates to man's knowledge which, in turn, relates to his will. Because man's knowledge is limited, so is his will. And because God's knowledge is absolute, so is His Will. The relationship

⁴² Sa'id Nursi, *al-Talāsīm*, 100.

between man's will and God's Will is like a baby put on an adult's shoulder. The baby shows the man the direction he chooses to go and the things he chooses to do. The baby himself is powerless to do the things he wishes, but the man assists him in all the way. Similarly, man wills and God makes the will actualized. Although God's Will is absolute, He allows that of man's to be actualized. However, unlike a baby, man, in relation to God, is reprimandable because he is bestowed with the knowledge and conscience of his own limitedness, while the baby is not.

The Interplay of God's Absolute Will and Man's Secondary Will: An Ontological Portrait and Some Moral Implications

As mentioned earlier, Nursi has outlined in the First Topic seven epistemological and ontological arguments that reconciling God's will and human will. Below is the detail discussion on the structure or the interplay between these two aspects.

On the ontological plane, the process of the occurrence of everything – which can be coined as 'event-creation' – takes place from the interplay between two Divine aspects: the Manifest Record or Destiny Theoretical (*Imāmun Mubīn*) and Manifest Book or Destiny Actual (*Kitābun Mubīn*). The former is the notebook of principles of creation, say, for example, of a tree which are written in its seed (in accordance with Divine Knowledge). Meanwhile, the latter is the notebook of Divine Power, where the written destiny is actualized – when, for example, the seed turns into a tree.

But the transition (*intiḳālah*) between the record and its actualization is not compulsory. Therefore, even though God has predetermined that things will happen and take place in this or that way, it is not incumbent upon Him to really actualize it accordingly because God is absolutely free in His decisions.

Theologically, a believer attributes everything to God, "even his actions and self"⁴³ and that everything happens because God has determined them so. Even the substantiality of his self is dependent upon the perpetual process of recreation. However, when a tiny speck of his reality confronts him – that is, his will, he cannot relieve it upon God. And he must embrace the fact that he is indeed in control of his own will, but not of his actions.⁴⁴ And then again, he is made aware of his own limitations when Divine Determining confronts him once again. Also, he is to realize that he can appeal to God's mercy so that whatever bad things that is already predestined for him can be rescinded.

Morally, a believer is to oscillate between three stations of realization. The first is to realize that all of his actions and ontological substantiality is not his to begin with. Secondly, he is to realize that if there is anything that is his, it is his will. Then again, the third realization limits his ownership on himself that if there is anything good about him, it is God manifesting Himself through him, and that whatever that is bad issues forth from his own volition. Even then, the actualization of his evilness rests on God's permission. Follows is a quotation of his words:

"He does not have the right to take pride in good deeds; his part in them is extremely small. For what wants and requires the good deeds is Divine mercy, and what creates them is dominical power. Both request and reply, reason, and cause, are from God. Man only comes to have them through supplication, belief, consciousness, and consent. As for

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

evils, it is man's soul that wants them, either through capacity or through choice."⁴⁵

The purpose of believing in Divine Destiny, then, is now clear. According to Nursi, it does not burden the free spirit, but promises it comfort and security. With divine destiny, man can throw his burdens and roam freely within God's perfect plans. It removes the illusion of free carnal soul and breaks its hold over man. Similarly, man's acceptance of God's authority and predetermination will lead to his happiness, even if he faces calamities. From difficulty comes ease, and sometimes hardship revives the light of one's existence, preventing his existence from monotony. Misfortune and pain should therefore be viewed as flashes of Divine Wisdom.

It is very interesting that Nursi once again resorts to God's Determining when it comes to the final occurrence of the action. From this, there are some important inferences. The first is that Nursi does not consider God's decree and human free will as symmetrically collaborative or cooperative where an occurrence or an action is a result of an autonomous association of agents united voluntarily. Instead, the relationship is asymmetrically corroborative by nature. God's Determining is bigger in scope and powerful in nature.

In scope, God determines the conditions of the human's self and actions. Situations of a person are decided, which includes his gender, family background as well as the environments that lead a person to a particular course of action. This is also true for the final occurrence of the action. Nursi brought an illustration of what happened to different seeds that grow into different kinds of plants with each and every strength and weakness.

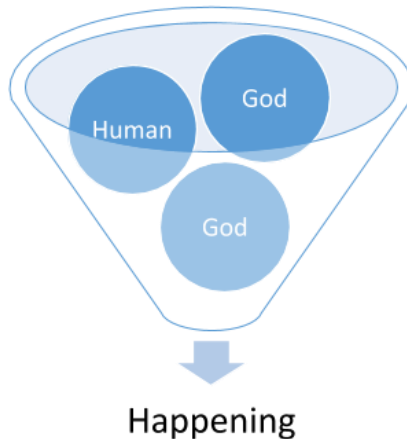
In this, Nursi brought a harmonious relationship between God's decree and human free choice. Human is

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

basically free in his choices, that there are other important settings provided by God by His unlimited Power, Will and Knowledge, especially in placing a person in a certain situation that leads him to weigh certain options, and finally, the real action as well as consequences are again decided by God. The example brought by Nursi is quite different from situations brought by classical discussion of being a sick person who cannot accomplish his tasks even if he wanted to.

Nursi brought a situation where there are many reasons for the consequence to take place. Human is just contributing one out of many factors leading to occurrence of a happening (figure 1). For that, he must acknowledge that it is God who has caused good things to happen. Nevertheless, he should be held responsible for the bad things since he is contributing a part, albeit a small one, for the bad things to happen. The process of actualization for the good things and bad things are the same, but with different moral implications.

Figure 1. The process of event-creation.



While the good things that take place are credited wholly to God, the bad things hold the man accountable. This is because whatever good that happens, although willed by man, is just a conformation to God's already predetermined plans. In other words, he wills what God has already willed. Meanwhile, evil happens because, although God allows it, man wills it. In other words, man wills against what has been willed by God.

Nursi brought several examples to illustrate the situation. One of the examples is an unjust judge. In the action combines between God's determining which is good and judge's unjust action. God's determining and creation, from all aspects including origin and end, source and branch, cause and results is free from evil, ugliness, and tyranny.⁴⁶ An example to illustrate of what happens in this life is between a father who hold his son on his back. The son gives direction to the father to move, and in case that both of them enter a dangerous place by following the instruction of the son though the father warned him not to.⁴⁷ Then, the son (the doer who wishes to choose the harmful choice) is to hold responsibility.

To explain about the relationship between God's will and human effort in evil is that, the 'acquisition' (*kasb*) of evil, that is, the desire for evil, is evil, but the creation of evil is not evil.

"Divine Determining is both exempt from evil (*sharr*) and ugliness (*sū'*) with regard to results and fruits, and free from tyranny (*ẓulm*) and ugliness (*qubḥ*) with respect to reason and cause. Because Divine Determining looks (*yata'allaqu*) to the true causes and acts justly" whereas "Men construct their judgements on causes which they see superficially and fall

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

into error (*zulm*) within (*dimn*) the pure justice of Divine Determining."⁴⁸

Therefore, its actualization disturbs the whole predetermined plans of the universe already set out by God. And this is more so in the case of disbelief. As is described by Nursi:

"For although disbelief is only one evil, it insults the whole universe, accusing it of being worthless and futile, and denies all beings, which display proofs of Divine unity, and is contemptuous towards all the manifestations of the Divine Names."⁴⁹

In short, the importance and moral implications of the understanding of this asymmetrical corroborative relationship between God's will and man's will is best summarized by Nursi himself:

"Divine Determining has not been included among the matters of belief to relieve people from their obligations and responsibility, but to save them from pride and conceit, (and therefore is included into the problem of faith). While the power of (secondary) choice is included under the problem of faith in order to be the source of evils, not to be the source of virtues, so that people become like the Pharaoh."⁵⁰

Morally, the implication that ensues this ontological understanding of free will and good and evil is a person should continuously strive for goodness and should not easily feel content with the good things that he does. For, in reality, the Real Agent is God. To Him is the exclusive

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

right of goodness and realness. Man is just a locus (*mazhar*) through which God makes manifest His goodness.

In addition, evil is something of this world. It exists not because God has created it, but because it is not God. Ontologically, anything that is not God is deprived of perfection, and, therefore, goodness. Good and evil, therefore, is not of an antithetical relationship, but of degrees, of spectrums. Evil is not an ontological objectivity in itself, but a privation of goodness.

Figure 2. Representational Relationship between Good and Evil in Man's Doing



As illustrated by the above figure, instead of making choice between good and bad as two choices of the same level, a person should strive with his best to be in good and the best that he could and to get rid himself of evil. Evil includes any bad happening as the result from a person's bad action, as well as negligence and fault. A person should learn from time to time to free himself from any bad, though it is almost impossible to totally free from that. The spirit of improving one's self is needed more than the achievements. Furthermore, improvements must be always with God, in that he must always seek God's aid in transforming himself. Because, ultimately, even his self is not truly his.

Conclusion

It is interesting that Nursi's theory proves his ability to solve a subtle conception in theology. He could present a

reality which works from two different perspectives – from God’s perspective and man’s perspective, and therefore harmonious instead of dichotomous. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin. He also solves the vital problem raised by the Mu‘tazilites and also modern thinkers who came to the conclusion that in affirming the human power of choice and sense of responsibility, Allah’s will needs to be restricted. At the same time, his theory is also a refinement of Sunnite traditions. Nursi’s system is characteristically Sufistic in its articulation, a characteristic which is inexistent in the Ash‘arite and Maturidian systems.

As for implication in morality, Nursi’s theory concluded that seeing one’s own relation to other humans, a person must not resort to escapism of God’s omnipotence. One must understand human relations in human terms – that is, as possessing free will and actions. Meanwhile, while relating one’s self to God, one must find refuge in the Absolute Subjectivity of God, denigrating one’s self as only vehicles. Nevertheless, if one understands the true nature of God, one will ascribe to Him only his good deeds. For God does not do except only good things.

In conclusion, the will that is truly free is the will to be conscious of the ontological indigence we have towards God. And that even otherwise, God still bestows us with the physicalization of our will. However, if what we will is against that which is already predetermined by God, then that is evil. And that is how we are responsible for our own actions. The impact of Nursi’s discourse on God’s determining and human freedom is very remarkable, not only in the faith but also on the system of morality. He also was successful to provide the discussions of very subtle issues attempted to be solved by major theological schools in a very casual yet meaningful way to the Muslims’ life.

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