

A New Ethics of Compassion for Animals: Said Nursi on the Rights of Flies

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Abstract

This paper will try to present and discuss Said Nursi's (d. 1960) ethics of compassion and the possibility of a new ethics of compassion derived from the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*. It will start with a slight detour in the history of philosophy to keep the evolution of an ethics of compassion in perspective. Then, it will deal with Said Nursi's perception of compassion as he discovers mercy and compassion as universal values manifested by all creatures. For him, like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), and Rūmī (d. 672/1273), the existence and reality of divine mercy are as clear as the sun. Therefore, the compassion observed in humans, animals, and plants reflects and indicates universal compassion: it is from God. The paper's primary focus will be on Nursi's treatise on flies.

Keywords

Animals – Ethics – Said Nursi – Ibn 'Arabī – al-Ghazālī – Rūmī – Compassion

منظور جديد لأخلاقيات الرفق بالحيوان: حقوق الذباب عند سعيد نورسي

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الخلاصة

تحاول هذه الدراسة تقديم أخلاقيات الرفق لدى سعيد نورسي (ت. 1960) ومناقشتها، بهدف تشكيل منظور جديد لأخلاقيات الرفق مؤسسة على «رؤية العالم» المستمدة من القرآن الكريم. تبدأ المقالة بمقدمة موجزة عن تاريخ الفلسفة، بغرض فهم تطور أخلاقيات الرفق في سياقها العام. ثم يتناول المقال تصور سعيد نورسي لمفهوم الرفق في إطار مقارنته لمفاهيم الرحمة والرفقة باعتبارها قيماً شاملة تتجلى في كافة المخلوقات. بالنسبة لنورسي، كما كان الحال عند الغزالي (ت. 505/1111) وابن عربي (ت. 638/1240) ورومي (ت. 672/1273)، فإن وجود الرحمة الإلهية وواقعها واضحان كما الشمس في رابعة النهار. لذلك، فإن الرفق الذي نلاحظه عند الإنسان والحيوان والنبات يعكس في واقع الأمر الرحمة الشاملة، التي هي من عند الله. وتمثل رسالة نورسي في الذباب المادة الأساسية التي يعتمد عليها هذا المقال.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الحيوان - الأخلاقيات - سعيد نورسي - ابن عربي - الغزالي - رومي - الرفقة

1 Introduction

Discussing animal rights in a world shaped by repetitive cycles of violence could be ironic. At the same time, fundamental human rights have been in bad shape for decades in many parts of the world due to civil wars, conflicts, terrorism, racism, fascism, and totalitarianism. However, humans are all in the same boat, as they live on planet Earth. It is also a reality that aside from close friends and family members, we regard most people with an attitude of benign neglect, which Norman Geras calls “the contract of mutual indifference” (Geras 1999, 28). In other words, self-motivated individuals with appropriate resources at their disposal feel free to achieve their (un)sustainable ends and do not care for the rest of humanity. So, it may be easy to think, “With all these problems with human rights, let us forget the environment and animals for a moment” (Fuller 2011, 1).

Nevertheless, there is a more charitable spin to calls for the humane treatment of animals. As Fuller boldly underlines, we should never forget that “our treatment of animals is designed to hold up a mirror to our souls: We treat animals poorly because we treat humans poorly” (Fuller 2011, 1). Hopefully, global

awareness and sensitivity will increase to restore and consolidate the rights of every creature to be respected. Therefore, any initiative and movement regarding environmental ethics and climate change are signs of hope for growing respect for life on Earth.

Karl Jaspers (d. 1969) articulates the role and importance of history in understanding the present as follows “[a] universal view of history and consciousness of one’s present situation mutually sustain one another. As I see the totality of the past, I experience the present. *The deeper the foundations I acquire in the past, the more outstanding my participation in the present course of events.* Where I belong and what I am living for I first learn in the mirror of history” (Jaspers 1965, 271, emphasis mine). Therefore, I will clarify what I mean by new ethics towards animals with some reflections on the history of philosophy and Islamic moral philosophy. While there are different views on the impact and influence of Greek philosophy on Islamic ethics, it can be argued that “the Greek–Muslim connection contributed to the development of a genre of ethics that related metaphysics to virtue ethics” (Ayubi 2019, 33). Although the Muslim engagement with Greek sources was highly generative, their philosophical framework is taken from Aristotle (d. 322 BCE), the Peripatetics, and Neoplatonism, offering little general philosophical interest that is new (Ayubi 2019, 21). This can be seen in the works of classical Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindī (d. 259/873), Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), Dawwānī (d. 908/1502), and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209).

Moreover, as Hovannisian underlined, “Jurists came to regard the Qur’ān as a legal document, and the observance of specific rules and regulations as the fulfillment of the Divine will. As the ethical aspects of the Qur’ān were overshadowed by or merged with the legal formulas ... the Qur’ān became the prisoner of its interpreters rather than their source and guide” (Rahman 1985, 1). Sarra Tlili, the author of *The Animals in the Qur’ān*, also underlined the same issues as follows and explained why classical ethical theories neglected animal rights:

Although the welfare of animals, human and nonhuman, received ample attention, issues connected with the natures and status of nonhuman species did not benefit from the same level of consideration despite the fact that both the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth contain a wealth of material and offer remarkable perspectives on this dimension of the animal question.

TLILI 2012, 3

She argues that “by a close reading of the Qur’ān, which not only presents non-human animals as psychologically complex beings but also values all species

far more than is usually conceded,” before setting out to explore the Qur’ān’s approach to nature and the status of animals, both human and nonhuman (Tlili 2012, 3). When it is argued that the classical Islamic ethical theories are not derived from the Qur’ānic *Weltanschauung*, it is implied that they do not reflect the spirit of the Qur’ān on specific contemporary topics such as human rights, gender, and, last but not least, animals. A profound study of the Qur’ānic worldview points to the opposite.

Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993) was a Japanese philosopher of language who also specialized in Iranian and Islamic studies. He had a keen interest in understanding the semantics of the Qur’ānic *Weltanschauung* and how the new message was understood and practiced by the first generation of Muslims as follows:

... in the first place a fourfold relationship between God and man, which is very relevant for our topic here (i) God is the Creator of man; (ii) He communicates His Will to man through Revelation; (iii) there subsists a Lord-servant relationship between God and man and (iv) the concept of God as the God of goodness and mercy (for those who are thankful to Him) and the God of wrath (for those who reject Him). The believers in this fourfold relationship between Allah and man constitute a Community (Ummah Muslimah) by themselves and believe in the Last Day, Paradise and Hell.

RAHMAN 2002, ix

Reflecting on Izutsu’s argument Fazlur Rahman highlights that “Izutsu’s description of the historical evolution of these concepts in pre-Islamic Arabia up to the appearance of Islam is quite detailed and valuable” for a new ethical theory based on the Qur’ānic *Weltanschauung* (Rahman 2002, viii–ix). It also supports the main argument of this paper, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, this paper will try to present and discuss Said Nursi’s (d. 1960) ethics of compassion and the possibility of a new ethics of compassion derived from the Qur’ānic *Weltanschauung*, which includes compassion and care for all creatures. It will start with a slight detour in the history of philosophy to keep the evolution of an ethics of compassion in perspective.

2 Schopenhauer and Ethics of Compassion

To understand the inception and meaning of ethics of compassion, it is instructive to start with Arthur Schopenhauer (d. 1860) as he “developed the

most comprehensive analysis of the nature and the moral significance of compassion within the Western philosophical tradition” (Cartwright 2005, 30). David E. Cartwright articulates the deep connection between his philosophy and Buddhism because of their mutual emphasis on the fundamental role of compassion within human moral life (Cartwright 2005, 30). However, when discussing the ethics of compassion, we should not neglect the Chinese Confucian philosopher Mencius (d. 289 BCE), who has often been described as the “Second Sage” after Confucius. Mencius’ basic argument has ramifications for natural theology, which argues that “everyone has a heart-mind which feels for others” (Liu 2003). To show what he refers to as innate goodness, Mencius used the example of a child falling down a well, which can be regarded as an exact thought experiment for his students (Chan 1963, 65).

Curiously, when pointing out the Buddhist roots of Schopenhauer, Cartwright argues, “Compassion is the basis of morality, the source of all actions possessing moral worth and the leitmotif of people possessing morally good characters” (Chan 1963, 65). Schopenhauer identifies three fundamental “incentives” that stimulate human action. Compassion, egoism, and malice. Schopenhauer thinks egoism is the innermost essence of every human being and animal (Schopenhauer 2010, 214; Guyer 2012, 407); it is the real anti-moral incentive in both human beings and nonhuman animals (Cantwell 2017, 26). Moreover, in his view, an act cannot have moral value if it is egoistic. Then, Schopenhauer concludes, “Compassion, and compassion alone is the moral incentive” (Cantwell 2017, 26), which is “the sole non-egoistic incentive that leads us by its essence to promote the well-being of another or to prevent woe to another, and thus constitutes the sole foundation of morality” (Shapshay 2019, 151–152).

This account of compassion conveys the concept’s original meaning as passion comes from the Latin word *patiri* and the Greek *pathein*, meaning to suffer, undergo, or experience. So, compassion means “to endure something with another person, to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, to feel her pain as though it were our own and to enter generously into her point of view” (Armstrong 2012, 6–7). Therefore, compassion can be defined as an attitude of principled, consistent benevolence that requires what the Greeks called *ekstasis*, a “stepping outside” of the self.

3 Muslim Pioneers of Compassion

The first pioneer of compassion in Islam certainly is the Prophet Muḥammad himself, whom the Qur’ān presents as “a mercy for all creatures” (*rahma*

lil-‘ālamīn) (Q 21:107). As the messenger of God, he presented his followers with outstanding examples of how compassion can be a source of moral responsibility towards all creatures in the concept’s original meaning. Most importantly, he presented a new worldview based on compassion and mercy; as God says in the Qur’ān, “Your Lord had inscribed for Himself (the rule of) Mercy” (Q 6:54). As a reflection of Divine mercy, The Prophet insisted on animals’ protection and kind treatment. It showed that Muslims should act kindly towards all living beings through their deeds and sayings. When mentioning neighbors’ rights, he formulated it with a sense of compassion, saying, “he is not a believer whose stomach is filled while his neighbor goes hungry” (al-Bukhārī n.d.(a), 112). He implies that it is part of being a true believer in feeling the suffering and pity of hungry fellows and even extending the boundary of compassion to include all creatures: “The Most Merciful One is merciful towards those who are merciful. Act kindly to those on the earth so that those in the heavens [the angels] will be merciful to you” (Abū Dāwud n.d., *ḥadīth* 169). The Prophet warned Muslims against mistreating animals, saying, “a woman was sent to Hell because she tied up her cat and neither gave it food nor allowed it free to hunt the cockroaches” (al-Bukhārī n.d.(b), book 59, *ḥadīth* 124). Moreover, an excellent and instructive example of how compassion can stimulate moral action is also told by the Prophet with the metaphor of the well:

A man (in another narration woman) was walking along a road and felt thirsty. Finding a well, he lowered himself into it and drank. When he came out, he found a dog panting from thirst and licking at the earth. Therefore, he went down again into the well, filled his shoe with water, and gave it to the dog. For this act, God Almighty forgave him *his* sins. The Prophet was then asked whether man had a reward through animals, and he replied: “In everything that lives, there is reward.”

AL-BUKHĀRĪ n.d.(b), book 49, *ḥadīth* 23; JOHNSON-DAVIES 1994, x

Nomanul Haq, a Pakistani professor of Islamic history and philosophy, argues that “... in everything that lives there is a reward” must be considered a broad central principle of Islam’s environmental ethics (Haq 2001, 173). However, what is relevant and important here is to ask what motivated the person to go down the well and bring water for the dog. It is nothing more than an emotional response, the immediate compassion s/he felt from their heart towards the poor dog, which the Prophet generalized as a normative ethical rule for compassion and care for all creatures. Although classical ethicists neglected the moral implication of this story for the ethics of compassion, *The Legend*

of the Moslem Saints abounds in tales of pity shown towards animals (including the neglected dogs), birds, and even insects (Nicholson 1914, 108).

If we suppose the Prophet is the embodiment of the Qur'ānic ethos of mercy for all creation, then it is not difficult to conclude that it is up to human beings to *discover and develop their God-given potentialities* for compassion in themselves. Each person should try to be a perfect human being whose relationship with the creation is not based on utilitarian and hedonistic axioms but instead on the concept of compassion. Many figures in Islamic history follow the footsteps of the Prophet and reflect the spirit of the Qur'ān. For example, Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 185/801), a famous female Sufi in Islam, approached all of creation with a sense of compassion, resulting in friendship with animals:

One day Rābi'a had gone to the mountain, and herds of wild animals gathered around her. Ḥasan appeared, and the animals ran away. He was angry and asked Rābi'a, "Why did they run from me but have a friendship with you?" Rābi'a asked him what he had eaten that day, to which he replied onions fried in fat. "You have eaten their fat," she remarked, "How should they not run away from you?"

HELMS 1993, 12

In Muslim hagiographical literature – a genre dedicated to the individuals, saints, or holy persons, who hold a distinct religious status in society (Hussain 2018, 1) – many examples similar to the one of Rābi'a can be found. What is essential for our case is that "the tradition of religious biographical writings is not inspired by any outsider influence but is an indigenous creation of the Muslim community" (Hussain 2018, 1). H. A. R. Gibb also argues that "the biographical dictionary is a wholly indigenous creation of the Muslim community" (Hussain 2018, 2).

The case of the Sufi Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī (d. 261/875) is another excellent example that supports the argument of this paper. One day he purchased some cardamom seeds in the city of Hamadhān and, before departing, he put a small leftover quantity into his gabardine. On reaching his native town Bisṭām and remembering what he had done, he took out the seeds and found that they contained several ants. He said to himself, "I have carried the poor creatures away from their home," and immediately set off and journeyed back to Hamadhān – a distance of 450 miles (724 km); Bāyazīd was driven by compassion for all creatures based on the love and respect for God (Nicholson 1914, 108; Açıkgenç 2014, 491).

Al-Ghazālī, a celebrated and influential Muslim theologian, thinker, and Sufi, was also aware of compassion as a foundational axiom for Muslim moral

life. Commenting on the profound and far-reaching implications of the first *sūra*, al-Fātiḥa (Q 1), he argues that to understand “the magnitude of God’s mercy (*raḥma*), as it is *demonstrated in His creation, scientific knowledge is required*” (Tamer 2015, 74, emphasis mine). Al-Ghazālī articulates that God has created each creature “in the most perfect kind, and has given it everything it needs,” and describes in detail, for example, how the mosquito, the fly, the spider, and the bee, “the smallest” among animals, have been created and sustained by the Compassionate God (al-Ghazālī 1977, 67). When we look at the language used here, it is not difficult to see the significant impact of the Qur’ān on his language and style, the same way the Qur’ān reminded the Prophet (Q 88:17). Al-Ghazālī also asks his readers to look at mosquitos, flies, spiders, and bees, always considering how they have been created and are interconnected with the whole system.

Moreover, al-Ghazālī argues that although the verse “The Lord of all worlds” (Q 1:2) is one of the most concise phrases in the Qur’ān, it most perfectly encompasses the various types of divine works manifested in the universe. He writes, “He has been creating every one of these according to the most perfect and best of its kind and has given it everything it needs” (al-Ghazālī 1977, 67). Thus, as everything is linked to the Creator and reflects His Lordship, everything is essential and vital in the chain of creation. In short, al-Ghazālī sees the signs of God’s love in insects and the whole creation (Tamer 2015, 74). Another significant point emphasized by al-Ghazālī about bees which extends to all animals, is that: “The bee which does not possess man’s rational faculty is ‘guided’ by the merciful God, which leads man, however, to discover the wonders of the bee and obtain a deeper appreciation of God’s wonders [...], kindness, and mercy” (Tamer 2015, 75). If God guides the bee, then all animals are guided by God in organizing their lives and perform miraculous acts in ecosystems as the Qur’ān underlines: “you will not see any flaw in the creation of the Compassionate” (Q 67:3).

3.1 *Nursi in the Footsteps of the Pioneers*

Following the footsteps of al-Ghazālī, whom Nursi considers one of his spiritual masters, he also made it clear that animals are guided in their daily routine life by God and not by what materialist philosophy considers to be instinct. A good example is Nursi’s observation and speculation about bees. As numerous *sūras* of the Qur’ān bear the names of animals – for instance, al-Baqara (“The Cow,” Q 2); al-Naḥl (“The Bee,” Q 16), al-Ankabūt (“The Spider,” Q 29), and al-Naml (“The Ant,” Q 27) – Nursi assumes that this naming is not random and superficial but has more profound implications for the reader to contemplate. For example, the verse “Your Sustainer inspired in the bee that it should seek a

dwelling-place in the mountains" (Q 4:48) invites us to look at bees from a new and holistic perspective and try to see what is not seen at first and superficial sight. For Nursi, the reason is apparent: "The bee is, concerning its disposition and function, (is) a miracle of God's power" (Nursi 2013, 177), and this also explains why the *sūra* al-Naḥl ("The Bee," Q 16), has been named after it. He articulates his argument as follows:

Concerning its disposition and function, the bee is now such a miracle of Divine power that a whole chapter of the Quran has been named after it. For to inscribe in the minute head of that little honey machine a complete programme for the fulfilment of its important task; to place in its diminutive stomach the most delicious of foods and to ripen it there; to place in its sting poison capable of destroying and killing animate beings, without causing any harm to its own body or the member in question – to do all this with the utmost care and knowledge, with exceeding wisdom and purposiveness, partakes of a perfect orderliness and equilibrium, and thus unconscious, disorderly, disequibrated nature or chance could never interfere or participate in any of this.

TURNER 2021, 39–40

Muslim philosophers understood this guidance as a manifestation of Divine Compassion. Thus, the connection between God, humans, and creation is based on compassion. Al-Ghazālī, for example, goes one step further and argues that when the individual contemplates the universe and its overwhelming implications for humanity, he can feel a sense of gratitude toward God, which is mentioned in the first verse of the first *sūra*, "Praise to be God" (Q 1:1; al-Ghazālī 1977). As the entire creation is a gift to humanity and animals, humans must feel a sense of gratitude towards the owner of the universe out of a free will.

Al-Ghazālī's understanding is echoed in the poetry of Yunus Emre (d. c.720/1320?), a Sufi poet from Anatolia, who believed that every particle in the world, animate and inanimate, is manifesting the beauty and greatness of God. When Yunus Emre summarized the idea of ethics based on love and compassion with his saying, "We love all creatures for the sake of their Creator" (Köprülü 2006, 291), he was suggesting ethics of love and compassion towards all creatures. Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640), in the spirit of gnostic tradition, once more reminds us of the ontological dimension of mercy as a universal principle as follows:

The nature of existence is tantamount to knowing God's mercy since mercy and being are the same reality. Understanding God's mercy demands a vision of the cosmic order in which *all things proceed from mercy and return to mercy*. Since all things issue from God and are nothing but modes of God's being, they can also be said to issue from mercy and be nothing but modes of God's mercy.

RUSTOM 2012, 119, italics mine

Therefore, the problem is that although there has been a strong focus in Islamic thought on the ontology of compassion, classical Muslim ethics was based on rationality inherited from the Greeks and further developed within an Islamic context. I hope these preliminary remarks may put Said Nursi's understanding of compassion as a source for new ethics for animals in perspective.

3.1.1 Nursi's Compassionate Life

Said Nursi, also known as Bediüzzaman (Badī' al-Zamān, "The Brilliant of the Era"), is a Muslim scholar from Turkey of Kurdish origin. He was born in Nurs, a village in the present-day province of Bitlis in eastern Turkey, in 1878. Nursi left behind an impressive oeuvre of books, treatises, and letters that later became known as *The Risale-i Nur Collection* [henceforth, referred to as *Risale*]. These writings cover a wide range of topics: articles of faith, ethics, metaphysics, political philosophy, spirituality, and theological interpretations of modern scientific findings. This oeuvre ascribed to him consists of writings that he sometimes dictated to his disciples and sometimes noted that he left behind, which his disciples posthumously finalized. Colin Turner, an expert on Nursi, considers him "a colossus above twentieth-century Muslim scholarship in Turkey" and an original and powerful voice that should be heard (Turner 2013, 2). Despite growing recognition over the last few years, his work is still not as well-known as it should be, certainly in the English-speaking world. Especially his views on eco-philosophy and animal rights remain relatively unknown.

Nursi spent a quarter of a century in prison and exile, as the new secular authorities considered him an existential threat to the system. Despite never complying with the secular and authoritarian regime, he preferred nonviolent struggle. In this paper, I will discuss Nursi's treatise on flies, written in the Eskişehir prison in 1935, when the world was in turmoil (Vahide 2005, 215).

3.1.2 Mothers as Sources of Compassion

Nursi's intellectual biography shows how his ethical views emerged and were shaped during his intellectual development. Nursi relates that he learned "the first lesson of compassion from his mother," and he was "by nature very

sensitive and compassionate.” Therefore he “was suffering beyond (his) capacity” (Vahide 2005, 4). It seems that Nursi deeply empathized with the suffering of humans and animals. Therefore, Nursi claims that “the chief foundation of the *Risale’s* way is compassion” and argues that “women are mines of compassion” in appreciation of his mother and women. (Vahide 2005, 318).

Nursi argues on many occasions that the compassion we observe – not only in human beings but also in animals and plants – reflects and indicates universal compassion. This perception of compassion shaped his entire life and served as a meta-ethical dimension from a very early age. For example, as a young man, he retreated into a sanctuary called *the Kubbe-i Hassa* in Tillo for study and reflection, and his younger brother would bring him his food every day. Dipping his bread in the soup, Nursi would eat it and give the crumbs to the ants around the building. When asked why he did this, he would say: “I have observed that they have a social life and work together diligently and conscientiously, and I want to help them as a reward for their republicanism” (Vahide 2005, 17). Another example of his compassion for animals occurred when he was sent to exile in March 1925 with notable Kurdish leaders and scholars to the Western part of Turkey. Using a hired oxcart to travel, Nursi noticed that the ox’s leg was bleeding. He immediately warned his friends, saying, “Gentlemen, let us get down; the ox’s leg is bleeding.” When one of his friends protested, saying, “Sir, we gave money to their owners,” Nursi replied, “My son, they are not the owner of these animals, but they are trustees” (Vahide 2005, 17). He clarifies that the actual owner is God, and we have a moral obligation of vicegerency toward His creation.

After a brief stay in his second place of exile, Isparta, Nursi was sent to the village of Barla. The gendarme who accompanied him said they met a forester wandering up and down on their way to Barla. When the boatman, who brought them, took the forester’s rifle intending to shoot partridges, Nursi immediately prevented him, saying, “The spring is close now, and [it is their] mating season. It is a shame, you should give up the idea,” and he stopped him (Vahide 2005, 188). His disciples also narrated about his extreme frugality and affection and extraordinary compassion for animals, from dogs to ants: “When he sometimes saw ants, or if we picked a stone and if ants appeared from underneath it, he would tell us to put the stone back. He would say, ‘Do not disturb the animals.’ In this spirit, he would feed the cats and pigeons that came to him from his food because of his compassion and love of animals. It is amazing to see that he does not neglect the mice” (Vahide 2005, 320–321).

When he was informed about the suffering of people during what he calls “ghastly World War(s)” (Nursi 2013, 223–224), Nursi was moved to intense compassion and pity. His ethics of compassion became visible during World War I

as he participated in the war as a volunteer commander, exerting humanitarian efforts in the chaos to save the displaced population from slaughter, including Armenian women and children (Vahide 2005, 320–321). Later, during World War II, he was moved to intense emotion when he heard about the suffering of innocent people because of the ongoing war in different parts of the world. Although he was in exile in Kastamonu under dire conditions, he sent a letter to his students, again revealing his ethics of compassion and expressing his feelings about the war and its devastating consequences: “Due to my compassionate and sensitive nature, I was shaken by the cataclysms that have brought disaster, loss, poverty, and hunger to men, coming as they have in this harsh winter, and at a time of catastrophic spiritual cold. Then suddenly I was reminded: in such calamities, there is a certain kind of mercy and reward for the victims, *even if they are non-believers*” (Nursi, 2012, emphasis mine). He further claims that “the innocent victims of such divine calamities become, in a sense, martyrs” (Nursi, 2012). Although the letter was written during the war, Nursi is not interested in hearing news about who was winning the war. He was deeply concerned about the plight and suffering of “*the innocent children and civilians suffering in Europe and Russia, from the coercion and violence of despots*” for political ambitions (Nursi, 2012, emphasis mine).

3.1.3 The Qur’anic Value System

Studying the roots of Nursi’s ontology of compassion, it becomes clear that it is based on the Qur’anic *Weltanschauung*. The basic principle regarding the universe that the Qur’an teaches is that “everything has been created with a specific order, duty, meaning, and purpose” by God (Q 38:27; 3:190–191; 21:16–17; 23:115). Therefore, deep reflection and contemplation (*tafakkur/tadabbur*) over the creation and signs of God in the furthest horizons and within yourself are seen as a prayer (Q 41:53). Therefore, this central concept of Islam is re-emphasized in the Qur’an, particularly in the parts revealed in Mecca. The Qur’an keeps reminding us regularly “of God’s blessings” and emphasizes that “God is the only One who creates and provides sustenance for His creation” (Q 35:3). The earth around us and the skies above us give us abundant blessings and unlimited sustenance at every step and moment in our lives.

The first verses of the Qur’an (96:1–5) were a call to read/recite in the Creator’s name. The connection between Creator and creation is established from the very beginning. Therefore, the impact of earlier verses of the Qur’an should not be underestimated as they shaped the worldview and identity of Muslims *vis-à-vis* the pagan perception of nature. The Qur’an presented a new frame of nature and the place of humanity within it.

We are repeatedly reminded that God has not created the world and abandoned it to sustain itself in a clockwise mechanistic way. He continues to be

actively involved with His creation, giving it what it needs for its continued and meaningful life. This applies to all of God's creation (Q 1:2). Therefore, these attributes, the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful, "encompass all meanings and aspects of mercy and compassion and epitomize mercy as a property of God Almighty" (Quṭb 2001, 1:3). This Qur'ānic link between humans and nature is neither utilitarian, nor pragmatic, nor instrumental. It is a link based entirely on love, peace, reassurance, and care. Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) is a well-known and distinguished Pakistani poet and philosopher. Writing in the first quarter of the 20th century, Iqbal is concerned with integrating metaphysics and ethics with the metaphysical bases of ethical positions (Özdemir 2017, 88–89). When studying the core messages of the Qur'ān, Iqbal was convinced that the primary purpose of these early verses was "to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and universe" (Iqbal 1968, 8–9).

With that in mind, we can say that one of Nursi's main goals was to understand God's "boundless activity" in creation "that necessitate boundless effort." He argues that "the All-Glorious Creator's wisdom has constantly been changing and renewing beings in an astonishing and awesome way through the activity of His lordship" (Nursi 2011, 330). It may be said that there is a sort of pleasure in all activity, or that activity is a sort of pleasure, even. Pleasure too is turned towards a perfection; indeed, it is a sort of perfection" (Nursi 2011, 332). But this argument does not satisfy his curiosity, as "activity indicates perfection, pleasure, and beauty," which leads to "the Necessarily Existent One, who is absolute perfection and the Perfect One of Glory," who "unites in His essence, attributes, and names every sort of perfection" (Nursi 2011, 332). He concludes that "boundless activity" in the creation and what "necessitate[s] boundless activity" by "the emergence and unfolding of their potentialities" is "the Most Merciful and Compassionate Essence" (Nursi 2011, 332). As God says, "My mercy embraces everything" (Q 7:156), so He has "a boundless sacred compassion and infinite pure love" for His creation:

It was made known to me with *complete certainty* that the activity of divine power in the universe and the constant flood of beings are so meaningful that through them, the All-Wise Maker causes all the realms of beings in the universe to speak. It is as if the beings of the earth and the skies and their motion and actions are the words of their speech; their motion is their speech. That is, the motion and decline arising from activity is speech glorifying God. The activity in the universe is the universe's silent speech and that of the varieties of its beings; their being made to speak.

NURSI 2014, 334, emphasis mine

Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) also reminds us that God “has mercy on the cosmos through life, for life is the sphere of the mercy that embraces everything” (Chittick 2009, 30). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand how Nursi, like his forerunners, has been reviving the language of the Sufi legacy.

4 The Roots of Compassion

Nursi commences his *Magnum Opus Sözcükler* (“Words”) with a commentary on the *Basmala*: “In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Merciful.” Because of the utmost importance of this short phrase, one day, a bright light from “*Basmala*” concerning divine mercy came to Nursi’s mind. Immediately he recorded it for himself in the form of notes (Nursi 2018, 18). Although, to his immense regret, he could not register it as revealed to him, he summarized his perception of Compassion and Mercy for himself and shared it with interested readers.

Moreover, this experience and the reaction it created help us understand how the concept of compassion permeates all of his writings – autobiographical essays and letters to his students, friends, and officials. The first observation Nursi makes regarding the ontology of compassion is that it is manifested “on the face of the universe, on the face of the earth, and the face of humankind” (Nursi 2021, 8). Nursi concludes later that the *Basmala* is a robe that connects humans through these manifestations to the Compassionate and Merciful, at least from three crucial dimensions.

The first is the great seal of Godhead (*ulūhiyya*), manifesting through the mutual assistance, cooperation, support, and interdependence that can be seen among all of the beings in the universe. This seal pertains to *In the Name of God*.

The second is the great seal of Divine mercifulness (*rahmāniyya*), which is made manifest through the mutual resemblance and proportionality of all of the plants and animals on the face of the earth. It is also demonstrated through the order, harmony, generosity, and compassion that are evident in the way that the plant and animal kingdoms are created, maintained, and administered. This seal pertains to *In the Name of God, the Merciful*.

The third is the exalted seal of Divine compassion (*rahīmiyya*), which is made manifest through the subtleties of Divine beneficence, clemency, and compassion, the rays of which shine forth from the face of humankind’s comprehensive nature. This pertains to the words

the Compassionate in the phrase *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*.

NURSI 2021, 8–9

Nursi concludes that “*In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* is the sacred title of three seals of Divine oneness (*aḥadiyya*) which form a strong, luminous line or thread on the page that is the universe” (Nursi 2021, 8–9).

Nursi’s perception of compassion seems to be that of a universal Divine Reality manifesting itself in three respective spheres: the universe, the earth, and the human; it underlines the universe’s interconnectedness on the one hand and the moral implications of this understanding for humanity. Although the ontological existence of Divine Unity is apparent in the boundless diversity of creatures, Nursi uses the metaphor of the sun to make it accessible to his readers. For example, he says, “the sun encompasses numberless things with its light. A pervasive conceptual ability and comprehensive view are necessary to behold the sun itself in the totality of its light. So, lest the sun is forgotten, it is displayed in every shining object through its reflection” (Nursi 2021, 135).

Furthermore, “following their capacities, all shiny objects reflect the sun’s attributes, such as its light and heat and the seven colours in its light, together with the manifestation of its essence. So too, the sun’s attributes encompass all the things facing it” (Nursi 2018, 19). Moreover, Nursi explores that Divine Oneness and eternal besoughtedness have a manifestation together with all the divine names in everything – in animate creatures in particular and especially in man’s mirror-like essence; through Divine Unity, each of the divine names connected to beings *encompasses all things* (Nursi 2018, 19). Then, Nursi tries to convince us that Divine mercy makes this boundless universe rejoice, and “it is Divine mercy that self-evidently illuminates all of these dark creatures that we see before us.” Divine mercy causes the whole universe to be geared towards humankind, just as the tree with all its parts is geared towards its fruit. Divine mercy causes the whole creation to look to humanity and hasten its assistance. That which fills and illuminates the vast reaches of endless space, filling the empty, vacant world and making it reverberate with joy – that, most certainly, is Divine mercy (Nursi 2021, 11).

Meanwhile, the divine name of the All-Merciful is manifested through the rays of a thousand and one names on *the face of the universe*. It is apparent through the innumerable manifestations of God’s absolute lordship on *the face of the earth*. Similarly, its complete manifestation is evident in a small measure in *man’s comprehensive form*, the same as on *the face of the earth and the face of the universe* (Nursi 2018, 23–24, emphasis mine).

Nursi’s views are similar to those of Mullā Ṣadrā, who states, “The cosmos is nothing but a synthesis of God’s names, which in themselves come about

as relationships between the manifest face of the essence and Its respective loci of manifestation. Just as the cosmos is the theatre for the manifestation of God's qualities, so too is man, who was, as the famous Prophetic tradition tells us, created upon the form or image (*ṣūra*) of Allāh" (Rustom 2013, 71).

Both for Şadrā and Nursi, it is clear that as the cosmos and the earth manifest the divine names, man's comprehensive form (or, as Şadrā would say, "perfect configurations") also display the same truth, and therefore, man "contains the cosmos within himself" (Rustom 2013, 72). What is essential is the ontological importance of humans as potentiality capable of manifesting divine names in their life and reflecting them, just as a mirror reflects the sun. Then they can remember the Mercy of God through an ethical life based on mercy and compassion. Therefore, Nursi argues that compassion and mercy are vital concepts to comprehend the Qur'ānic worldview and repeats: "If you want to understand the importance of this ascent, look at the beginning of each of the one hundred and fourteen *sūras* of the miraculous Qur'ān. Indeed, look at the beginnings of all estimable books, and the start of all good works" (Nursi 2021, 17). Nursi quotes al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), one of the eponymous founders of the four Sunnī *madhhabs* (legal schools), saying, "*In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* is only one verse, and yet it was revealed one hundred and fourteen times in the Qur'ān" (Nursi 2021, 17; al-Shāfi'ī 2012, 1:208). The Prophet reminded his community and future generations that "any action of importance not begun with *Basmala* is devoid of blessing and therefore incomplete" (Abū Dāwud n.d., *ḥadīth* no. 4807).

It is not difficult to see that the gist of the Nursian project is "attaining a sense of the divine presence through the strength of certain, affirmative beliefs and through *the lights proceeding from reflective thought on creatures which leads to knowledge of the Maker*; by thinking that the Compassionate Creator is all-present and seeing" (Nursi 2011, 218, emphasis mine). However, the moral perfection of humans is cultivated through the perpetual pursuit and acquisition of knowledge of the perfection of others, the universe, and God. Therefore, Nursi's ontology can be summarized as follows. First, God created the universe with a particular order, balance, measure, beauty, and aesthetic structure; it forms its Maker's most precise and decisive evidence. All living things are meaningful and interrelated. Therefore, Nursi, as a traveler of the universe, as he calls himself, begins to observe and study the book of the universe "from mosquitos to the system of the sun, with the same spirit and perspective given by the Qur'ān" to see every single thing as a sign and mirror of divine power, knowledge, and wisdom and therefore has intrinsic value (Nursi 2018, 753). Second, everything, from heavens to earth, stars to flies, angels to fish, planets to particles, prostrates, worships, praises, and glorifies

the Almighty God. However, their worship varies according to “their capacities and the Divine Names they manifest” (Nursi 2018, 371). Third, humans cannot be meaningless, purposeless, and idle in this majestic and meaningful universe. They are vicegerents of God (*khalīfa fī l-ard*), who have moral responsibilities towards God, humans, and the rest of creation. Fourth, mercy and compassion are universal values based on Divine names and manifested by all creatures. Nursi claims, “The existence and reality of divine mercy are as clear as the sun” (Nursi 2018, 21). Saying this, it is not difficult to see some implicit ramifications of Ibn ‘Arabī, Rūmī (d. 672/1273), ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492), and Mullā Ṣadrā in Nursi’s thinking.

4.1 *Do Not Disturb Flies!*

On 25 April 1935, Nursi and several of his students were taken from their homes and places of work, arrested, and jailed in the Eskişehir prison. Separated from his disciples, Nursi was placed in solitary confinement. As his biographer relates, the conditions in jail were horrendous. In prison, they could not even visit the lavatories. Eventually, some wardens came, dug a hole near the door, and inserted a pipe. Sleeping at night was impossible due to filth, bedbugs, and cockroaches. They were kept without food for twelve days.

Notwithstanding the conditions, Nursi continued to write, completing five more treatises in prison, including the treatise on flies (Vahide 2005, 216–217). What triggered the writing of his treatise on flies was an emotional feeling of compassion and pity he felt for these creatures in prison. However, Nursi hesitated to publish this small treatise immediately and advised his students to publish it posthumously at a time when it could be studied objectively. Nursi was concerned that his radical views regarding flies would be misunderstood, and he would be labeled a backward and zealous scholar by the militant secular establishment. Therefore, it was only published in the early 1980s for the first time.

Surprisingly, Nursi wrote the treatise in prison pending his trial, choosing to use this precious time to clarify that flies and all tiny insects are members of the divine ecology and have rights just like humans (Nursi 2011, 337–341). Nursi, when commenting on the meaning of “The All-Glorious One, the Owner of the Sublime Throne,” makes it clear that “the earth” is a center of the world, “a heart and *qibla* of the universe” (Nursi 2011, 342). Therefore, instead of preparing his and his disciple’s defenses, he prioritized defending the rights of flies to exist and live undisturbed by human cruelty. Nursi does not tell us to love flies but to understand their place in the ecology and respect their right to live. Oliver Leaman highlights Nursi’s critique of the concepts of humanism and secularism inherited from the anthropocentric enlightenment project

and emphasizes the rights of human beings over other animals and entities (Leaman 2003, 255–256). The treatise was written in response to the chemicals used to kill flies and insects in prison, but Nursi also respected flies on a less-drastring level, advising one of his students not to disturb them. Nursi's reaction advocated compassion towards animals and, in this case, towards flies in prison and produced guidelines for a new ethic of compassion.

This short treatise is also reminiscent of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written in 523 CE during the one-year imprisonment of Boethius (d. 525 CE), a Christian philosopher, writer, and politician (Boethius 1962). Having had long-lasting experiences of prison and exile, Nursi was aware of prisoners' devastating psychological and spiritual problems as he makes it clear in the introductory note that these "short pieces" were written, "as consolation for my brothers who were (in the ward) opposite to me in Eskişehir Prison" (Nursi 2011, 337). Thus, he reminds his inmates that flies may offer them some company in (their) exile, solitude, and loneliness. We can deduce that another reason for writing this treatise was to serve as "a consolation" for his brothers in prison.

It seems Nursi wrote the treatise on what was likely another tough day in prison. Moreover, it was fall, the season in which dark takes over from light, letting go and accepting the impermanence of things. However, as we understand from his writings, Nursi's reflection in the fall was not focused on his pending trial or the problems of prison life. Observing the flies in his cell, he realized that with fall, "flies will be discharged from their duties" (Nursi 2011, 337). In Nursi's theistic understanding, the meaning of life is not confined to this world. There will be another life in the hereafter. Like other animals, flies were divine servants with a unique purpose and meaning in the ecosystem. Therefore, Nursi powerfully countered "selfish humans" who were not aware of their religious duty and their role as officials within the ecosystem and "employed chemicals in prison to eliminate them for their minor annoyance" (Nursi 2011, 337). The officials wanted to eliminate flies because they disturbed them and the prisoners. While Nursi was contemplating the natural disappearance of flies with the coming of winter, using chemicals to kill them on a massive scale increased his pity. Out of emotional psychology and compassion for animals, he did not write it as a philosophical discourse, but rather in an intuitive and passionate spirit. The content of the treatise can be roughly summarized as follows:

Nursi considers flies as his friends and calls them birds, because the name fly, as used in everyday speech, has a negative connotation in the dark and gloomy atmosphere of the prison. He recalls that "in the evening, those miniature birds would be lined up in a most orderly fashion on the line" (Nursi 2011, 337). By naming them "miniature birds," he raises sympathy for flies, changing the popular perspective and feeling toward them. For example, when one of his disciples needed to hang the laundry and tried to chase the flies away

from the washing line. He stops him, saying, “Do not disturb those little birds; hang it somewhere else” (Nursi 2011, 337). This remark shows his deep perception of animals and respect for them. Therefore, using chemicals in prison to eliminate flies “aroused a sharp pity” in Nursi. However, his devoted disciple’s response was egoistic, saying, “We need the line; let *the flies* find somewhere else for themselves” (Nursi 2011, 337). Although the Qur’an makes it very clear, stating, “And there is no animal in the earth nor bird that flies with its two wings, but that *they are communities like yourselves*” (Q 6: 38), the young disciple was still drawing a clear line of demarcation between himself and animals from an anthropocentric perspective, which was not acceptable for the master.

The poisoning of flies in prison and his student’s self-centered approach to flies occupied Nursi’s mind the whole night. As Nursi used to lecture and respond to his students’ questions after the morning prayer, the lecture topic of the following morning was the rights of flies, their place, and their importance in the ecosystem. Nursi recalls, “In the early morning, a discussion started with this exchange about the numerous small creatures like flies and ants” (Nursi 2011, 337). Nursi does not confine his discussion to flies per se but extends it to all small creatures of the living world in light of the Qur’anic worldview. He used the metaphor of a best-selling book to make this intuitive argument clear and understandable to his students: “The species whose copies are thus numerous have important duties and great value, like the copies of a book are multiplied in relation to the book’s importance. That is to say, the species of flies have important duties and great value so that the All-Wise Creator has greatly multiplied those tiny missives of Divine Determining and copies of the words of Divine power” (Nursi 2011, 338). Then, he supports his argument by quoting the following verse from the Qur’an as it makes it clear “Those on whom you call besides God could not create [even] a fly if they all met together for the purpose!” (Q 22:73). He continues, telling his students that what they consider small and annoying creatures are miracles and clear signs of the act of creation. Therefore, “the creation of a fly is a divine miracle and clear sign to the act of creation [mûjiza Rabbâni and âyât takwîni].” He contends, on Qur’anic bases, that if “all causes were to assemble, they would be unable to make anything like it or to duplicate it and would be unable to dispute that divine sign” (Nursi 2011, 338). Nursi develops his argument as follows:

Flies, which form an important subject in the above verse, defeated Nimrod, and when Moses (PBUH) complained about their bothering him, saying: “O my Sustainer! Why have You so greatly increased the numbers of these irritating creatures?” the following answer came to him through inspiration: “You have objected about the flies once while the flies have asked many times: ‘O our Sustainer! This man has a huge head,

yet he praises You with only one tongue. And sometimes, he neglects to do that. If you had created us out of only his head, there would have been creatures like us praising You with thousands of tongues!”

NURSI 2011, 338

So, against this broad background, Nursi suggests that flies deserve more attention, appreciation, and protection.

4.1.1 Flies as Public Health Officials

Nursi suggests that if one looked at nature through the lens of the Qur’ān, he would see that “Almighty God has created an orderly group of carnivorous beings as public health officials of a sort; they cleanse the seas by gathering up the corpses of other sea-creatures that die every day in their millions and prevent the sea from becoming polluted and disgusting with their corpses” (Nursi 2011, 339). Then, Nursi argues that if those public health officials of the sea did not carry out their highly regular duties, the sea would not sparkle like a mirror; it would instead display low and touching turbidity. He writes:

Some, like eagles, for example, *through a divine impulse*, wonderfully perceive the location of a corpse from a distance of five or six hours, though hidden and distant, and hasten to remove it. If the health officials of the land were not extremely efficient and orderly in carrying out their duties, the face of the earth would become such as to make all weep. Furthermore, ants are employed as cleansing officials to collect the corpses of tiny creatures and small particles and fragments of bounty. They are given duties as *public health officials* to preserve tiny particles of *divine bounty from waste*, from being trodden underfoot, contempt and futility, and to gather up the corpses of other small creatures.

NURSI 2011, 339

Similarly, Nursi intuitively concludes that flies, too, are in charge of cleaning away poisonous substances and microbes that breed disease and are invisible to the human eye. His argument is challenging and warrants scientific studies to be confirmed.¹ He contends that contrary to common sense, flies “do not

1 A study by Australian scientists on flies, and Joanne Clarke, who presented the group’s findings at the Australian Society for Microbiology Conference in Melbourne, said, “We are looking where we believe no-one has looked before.” Working on the theory that flies must have remarkable antimicrobial defence systems to survive rotting dung, meat, and fruit, the team identified those antibacterial properties manifesting at different stages of a fly’s development (see: www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2002/10/01/689400.htm).

transmit microbes; on the contrary, through sucking up and imbibing harmful microbes, they destroy them and cause them to be transformed into a different state.” Therefore, he considers them “both health workers and cleansing officials and chemists” as “they prevent the spread of many contagious diseases” (Nursi 2011, 339). Reflecting on the number of these tiny creatures in the ecosystems, Nursi sees in them the “extensive wisdom” of the Creator. Being excessively numerous indicates their indispensable value for nature as only “valuable and beneficial things are multiplied” (Nursi 2011, 339). Here again, we see one of the underlying propositions of Nursi: Whatever has been created by God in the universe has been created with a particular purpose, meaning, and wisdom. Therefore, he does not get disturbed by the minor disturbances of flies and frames their existence and meaning within the larger picture of creation.

Then, he supports his argument by reflecting on the working of flies in the ecosystem as they transform “rotten, poisonous substances into a sweet and healing syrup, a confection of divine power, that rains onto the leaves of trees, they prove that they are machines for transmuting one substance into another” (Nursi 2011, 339). It seems that Nursi had spent much time in his exile profoundly reflecting on the integrity and interdependence of the workings of ecosystems. For Nursi’s keen eyes, flies demonstrate “what a mighty nation and group these tiny individuals form.” He even hears them say: “Do not look at our smallness, consider the vastness of our species, and declare, ‘All Glory be to God!’” (Nursi 2011, 339).

Then, Nursi criticizes the egoism, which he calls the “self-centered” approach of humans who do not discover and disclose the layer of meanings and wisdom in the creation. Looking at nature through the lenses of the Qur’ān, it was not difficult for Nursi to discover “*the thousands of instances of wisdom in the creation of flies*” and similar insects. Bees, for example, which belong to the species of flies in Nursi’s view, “give [humans] honey to eat, the sweetest and most delicate of bounties” as they receive *divine inspiration* as stated by the Qur’ān: “And [consider how] thy Sustainer has inspired the bee” (Q 16:68). According to Muhammad Asad (d. 1992), the expression “He has inspired” (*awhā*) is meant to bring out the outstanding quality of the instinct which enables the lowly insect to construct the geometrical masterpiece of a honeycomb out of perfectly proportioned hexagonal, prismatic wax cells – a most economical structure, and therefore most rational, as regards space and material. Together with the subsequently mentioned transmutation in the bee’s body of plant juices into honey, this provides striking evidence of “God’s ways” manifested in all nature (Q 16:77; Asad 2008, 16:89, fn.77). Therefore, Nursi reminds us that we should approach flies, insects, and animals in general not with hostility but

with love and compassion. In his words, “to be hostile towards creatures that suffer all sorts of difficulties in hastening in friendship to assist man, is wrongful and unjust.” (Nursi 2011, 339). Here, it can be seen that Nursi’s language towards all animals is mild, as he sees them as his friends in the loneliness of a prison cell and the solitude of exile.

5 Learning from Animals

Sarra Tlili states in the last paragraph of her book *Animal Rights in the Qur’ān* that “Qur’ānic nonhuman animals are there for humans *not only to learn about them but also to learn from them* many valuable lessons, not least of which, perhaps, obedience and submission to God (Islam), the very message of the Qur’ān” (Tlili 2012, 256, emphasis mine). Nursi’s approach and life are good examples of how we can learn from animals. In the spirit of the great sages such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Rūmī, Nursi never forgot his evolution from animality to perfect humanity, which came with responsibility and moral agency entrusted to him by God. In other words, he employed a different kind of anthropocentrism, as he considers an “ant as his brother, and the bee as his sister” (Nursi 2007, 162). Following the *tawhīdī* paradigm, Nursi understands the universe as a well-ordered and interconnected system, and nothing is small and insignificant to him. Therefore, he says about God that “Sustaining and directing *Earth and heavens* does not prevent Him from sustaining *insects*. *Sustaining and administering do not hinder Him from creating even the smallest animals, whether on land or in the sea*. Violent winds and furious seas do not distract Him from providing *His perfect kindness and goodness to every creature*, without exception, regardless of size, location, or any other factor” (Nursi 2007, 163, emphasis mine). Then, looking at, and listening to, nature, Nursi sees that the Mercy of God “appears smilingly amidst the sea’s fury and behind its stern, frowning face,” is audible when the sea roars, saying “O All-Mighty God, All-Majestic, All-Great! Glory be to You, how grand You are!” On the other hand, all little creatures respond silently: “O All-Subtle and Gracious God, All-Munificent, All-Providing, All-Compassionate. How gracious is Your favoring!” (Nursi 2007, 163).

Nursi reminds readers that the Sufi masters had a profound intuition to learn from animals, flies, and other insects. He quotes verses from Yunus Emre, which allude to the beautiful works of divine art that are the fly’s wings and body: “I loaded a single fly’s wing onto forty ox carts; Forty of them could not haul it; it remained thus decreed” (Nursi 2011, 342). Nursi contemplates flies closely, beyond the wisdom of their creation, and intuitively discovers some

practical lessons for people as they “pursue great cleanliness,” which is the essence of Islam. “These insects,” argues Nursi, “continually wash their faces, eyes, and wings as though taking ablutions, and have important duties. The common view is short-sighted; it is still unable to comprehend those duties” (Nursi 2011, 338). Nursi drew some practical lessons from flies for himself. As far as we know, Nursi experienced a spiritual crisis a few years after World War I and emerged from it with a reborn personality (Vahide 2005, 177). During this spiritual and intellectual transformation, he took real-life lessons for his moral and spiritual development, even from flies and other animals.

At one time, when I was struggling with my evil-commanding soul, it imagined that the bounties it saw in itself to be its own property, and it became conceited, proud, and boastful. I told it: “This property is not yours; it is on trust.” So it gave up its conceit and pride but became lazy; it said: “Why should I bother about someone who is not mine? Let him perish; what is it to me?”

Suddenly I saw that a fly had alighted on my hand and had started thoroughly cleaning its eyes, face, and wings, which were its trust from God. The fly was washing itself just like a soldier cleans his rifle and uniform thoroughly, which belong to the state. I said to my soul: “You look at that!” It looked and *learned a good lesson*. As for the fly, it became my conceited and lazy soul’s teacher and instructor.

NURSI 2011, 340

In his writings, Nursi reminds his students to look at everything around them, from flies to the sun, with a broader perspective to see the whole picture or, as Max Scheler would say, the “Kosmos,” or as Gregory Bateson would call it, the “System” (Scheler 2008; Bateson 1979), then learn from the book of the universe. Şükran Vahide, the biographer of Nursi, underlines that “the concept of the book of the universe” and “the reading of it through reflection or reflective thought (*tafakkur*) are central” to the Nursian project. They lie at the heart of “the way to reality” that [Nursi] opened up (Vahide 2014, 128–129). She also articulates that Nursi “uses many metaphors when discussing the universe, such as ‘an exhibition,’ ‘an arable field,’ ‘a guest-house,’ and ‘a palace,’ but the metaphor of ‘a book,’ that is, something ‘to be read’ is unique” (Vahide 2014, 128–129). Nursi “continually directs the attention of his readers to the universe, shows them how to ‘read’ it the way they read the Qur’ān and to learn from the myriad of meanings that all beings are significant, and draw the lessons the Qur’ān alludes to” (Vahide 2014, 128–129).

6 Legitimate Defense and Protection

However, we also should underline that Nursi's defense of flies and animals has a limit, and we may combat harmful creatures to repel their danger. When there is a threat from animals, especially wild ones, towards humans and even to other animals, humans are allowed to protect themselves and reasonably combat them. For example, Nursi suggests that we can fight wolves to protect sheep from their attack. However, he does not mean the natural hunting or killing of all wolves; instead, he offers a defensive action reminiscent of the just war theory. Interestingly, Nursi argues that the only permissible food for carnivorous animals is the flesh of dead animals. The *ḥadīth* states, "Retaliation shall be made for the hornless sheep on the horned on Resurrection Day" and notes that although their bodies perish, for animals whose spirits are immortal, there is reward and punishment in a manner appropriate for them in the hereafter (al-Nawawī n.d., *ḥadīth* 204). Consequently, it may be said that the flesh of live animals is unlawful for wild animals, and if they consume it, they will receive punishment.

Nursi also warns against the misuse of compassion by humans and animals. As "human compassion is a reflection of Divine mercy, it obviously should not exceed certain bounds, and certainly should not surpass the compassion of the One (PBUH) who is a Mercy to the Worlds." If it does so, then, of course, it is not mercy or compassion. It is, perhaps, a disease of the spirit, an ailment of the heart that leads to deviation and disbelief (Nursi 2012, 75). In this context, Nursi reminds that we should be careful about the "monsters that savage innocent animals" and not forget monsters, including humans who can destroy the whole world for their political agendas and selfish ambitions. Nursi further reminds us that if we show compassion to them, it will lead to "a grave injustice" to poor animals and humans alike (Nursi 2012, 75).

7 Conclusion

Since the birth of philosophy, there has always been a search for a solid foundation for ethics. Therefore, the question is an ancient one. Arthur Schopenhauer (d. 1860) is credited as the first philosopher who "developed the most comprehensive analysis of the nature and the moral significance of compassion within the Western philosophical tradition" (Cartwright 2005, 30). The concept of compassion is at the heart of the Qur'ānic worldview. Although there are several pioneers of ethics of compassion in Islamic philosophy and Sufism, no breakthrough theory of ethics of compassion has developed yet. This article

argues that new ethics of compassion can be drafted based on the Qur'anic worldview, and Nursi's thought forms a good point of departure for such a project.

In Nursi cosmology, God created the universe with a particular order, balance, measure, beauty, and aesthetic structure. All reality is the manifestation of His compassion. For him, the existence and reality of divine mercy are as clear as the sun in the universe. Therefore, the compassion we observe in humans, animals, and plants is a reflection and indication of the universal compassion of God. In fact, for him, "what makes this boundless universe rejoice is divine mercy. What illuminates these dark beings is self-evidently divine mercy. What fosters and raises creatures struggling with their endless needs is self-evidently, again, divine mercy. What causes the whole universe to be turned towards man, like a tree together with all its parts, is turned towards its fruit, and causes it to look to him and run to his assistance is divine mercy. Self-evidently divine mercy is what fills and illuminates boundless space and the empty, vacant world and makes it rejoice. And what designates ephemeral man for eternity and makes him the addressee and beloved of the Pre-Eternal and Post-Eternal One is self-evidently divine mercy" (Nursi 2018, 20). Therefore, he tries to articulate an ethic of compassion based on his theory of Divine Names.

To sum up, the lesson that can be learned from Nursi's ethics of compassion includes the responsibility to respect, care, and show compassion for all living creatures. He suggests new ethics of compassion within the Qur'anic worldview. Moreover, he demonstrated his teaching through his exemplary life, even when living in difficult and poor conditions in prison and exile. He felt compassion for the animals and always shared his food with his fellow animals. He was against killing animals and constantly reminded his disciples not to disturb animals.

Nursi deeply empathized with the plights and suffering of animals and humans. Therefore, I argue that he can be considered an eco-philosopher. His analysis and insights on the ethics of compassion may lead us far beyond classical ethical theories and suggest a new perception of ethics based on compassion, mercy, and love.

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