

HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS: THE WITNESS

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*by the witness and the witnessed, Quran, 85:3*¹

Introduction

Adhered to a materialistic cosmology, modern science typically regards matter as the fundamental substance behind all phenomena, including consciousness. In other words, matter is perceived as possessing independent objective existence and all phenomena are reducible to material interactions. This materialistic worldview, however, is not compatible with the findings of quantum physics, which put the fundamentality of matter into question and recognize the primary role of consciousness. Indeed, Max Planck, considered to be the founder of quantum mechanics, states

I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness. Everything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing, postulates consciousness.²

Likewise, Nobel quantum physicist Erwin Schrödinger corroborates this view when he asserts, "Consciousness cannot be accounted for in physical terms. For consciousness is absolutely fundamental. It cannot be accounted for in terms of anything else."³

Unlike materialistic cosmology, which is inherently irreconcilable with spirituality, quantum physics' worldview displays compatibility with the Islamic tradition in the sense that they both emphasize the primacy of consciousness over matter. Hence, the Muslim scholar Bediuzzaman Said Nursi asserts that

Matter is not the kernel, it is not the fundament, it is not a settled abode so that events and perfections may be affixed to it or constructed on it. Rather, it is a shell prepared to be split, rent, dissolved; it is a husk, it is froth, it is a form.⁴

This parallel is further echoed in Max Planck's words when he confesses

¹ and [of] Him who witnesses [all], and [of] that unto which witness is borne [by Him]! (Quran, 85:3) (Asad's translation)

Muhammad Asad explains that by creating the universe, God "bears witness", as it were, to His Own almightiness and uniqueness: cf. 3:18 - "God [Himself] bears witness that there is no deity save Him."

² Planck M. *The Observer*. London, UK; January 25, 1931.

³ Erwin Schrödinger. Quoted in: Walter Moore. *A Life of Erwin Schrödinger*. Canto edition. (Cambridge University Press. 1994), 181

⁴ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, Tr. S. Vahide, (Istanbul, 1997), 526

As a man who has devoted his whole life to the most clear headed science, to the study of matter, I can tell you as a result of my research about atoms this much: There is no matter as such. All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force, which brings the particle of an atom to vibration and holds this most minute solar system of the atom together. We must assume behind this force the existence of a conscious and intelligent mind. This mind is the matrix of all matter.⁵

Interestingly, imam Nursi also describes the transformation of particles as “the ‘vibrations’ and wanderings that occur while the signs of creation are being written in the book of the universe by the pen of power of the Pre-Eternal Inscraper.”⁶ He also adds that,

They are not games of chance and jumbled meaningless motion like the materialists and naturalists fancy. For like all beings, every particle says “In the Name of God” at the start of its motion, and it raises loads infinitely exceeding its strength. For example, a seed the size of a grain of wheat shoulders a load the size of a huge pine-tree. And on completion of its duty, it says “All praise be to God.” For by exhibiting an art that is beautiful and full of purpose and a decoration that is fine and full of benefits, which astound all minds, it displays a work of art like an ode in praise of the Glorious Maker.⁷

In this paper, I will explore aspects of quantum theory that are compatible with the teachings of the Islamic tradition concerning the relationships between subject and object and between matter and meaning and how they relate to consciousness. Then I will further explore the Islamic tradition’s understanding of consciousness as fundamental and the ultimate “witness.”

The Myth of Objectivity

In what follows, I will approach the Islamic perspective of consciousness from insights and questions generated by the field of contemporary philosophy of science. Accordingly, I chose to start with the subject-object relationship as it is as the center of the so-called objectivity of scientific inquiry. Actually, the value and authority of scientific knowledge stem from the claim that the methods and results of science are not, or at least they should not be, influenced by particular perspectives and biases. This claim is based on the assumption that the state or quality of the object of study is independent of the subject's individual interpretations, feelings, and prejudices. In other words, the reality and truth of the world (of objects), of the so-

⁵ Clifford Pickover, *Archimedes to Hawking: Laws of Science and the Great Minds Behind Them*, (Oxford University Press, 2008), 417

⁶Nursi, *The Words*, 30th Word, Second Aim

⁷Ibid

deemed *objective* world, exists outside the influence of the subject. In actuality however, objects would exist outside the influence of the subject only if both the object and the subject could somehow exist separately from each other, which is not the case. With a little reflection we realize that the constituents of the world, objects and subjects alike, are in fact inextricably interconnected. There is no void from which a subject might merely peer into universal happenings. Despite careful efforts to isolate variables, we cannot remove ourselves from our constant interaction with the surrounding world. Therefore objectivity is really a myth, namely the myth that we can acquire ‘objective’ knowledge of the world based purely on data and scientific evaluation and that the resulting ‘knowledge’ will not be affected by our preconceived notions or expectations.

The myth of objectivity is based on the illusion that it is possible to observe and assess an object or situation existing ‘out there’ in its own right. However, as Plato puts it, “Things are, for each person, the way he perceives them.” In other words, whether the scientist is aware of it or not, he perceives the world through a particular framework, which Thomas Kuhn calls “Paradigm.” Consequently, new scientific theories do not emerge as a product of accumulation of facts and data only, but also as the product and reification of new ways of seeing and perceiving the world. According to Thomas Kuhn, “What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see.” [Kuhn, 1970] Kuhn emphasized that there is no such thing as purely objective or neutral observational language; there is no way to describe reality in objective terms. In other words, scientists cannot claim that they merely “examine the facts,” because the “facts” are always products of perception. It is noteworthy that this is not just the situation of the social sciences or humanities but also of the so-called hard sciences.

Answers are Shaped by the Questions Asked

With the advent of the theory of relativity, even the conventional concepts of absolute time and space as independent aspects of objective reality were challenged. Newtonian physics had rendered time as absolute in the sense that it existed independently and consistently, unaffected by any subject or perceiver: “Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature flows equably without regard to anything external.”⁸ Space too had been conceived of as independent and static, and as such, unaffected by physical processes: “Absolute space, in its own nature, without regard to anything external, remains always similar and immovable.”⁹ However, modern physics has replaced this notion of absolute and separate time and space with a dynamic, four dimensional space-time model, in which time and space are both relative as well as inextricably interconnected. One of the implications is that what I call the past could be the future for someone else who could travel fast enough as is expressed in the following limerick.

⁸ Sir Isaac Newton, *Principia Philosophiae Mathematica Naturalis*, trans A. Motte (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 6

⁹ *Ibid*, 7

There was a young lady of Wight,
 Who traveled much faster than light,
 She departed one day,
 In a relative way,
 And arrived on the previous night. ¹⁰

Though the poem strikes a playful tone, it addresses a profound insight into the nature of reality: as immutable as they may seem, the past and future, before and after, take on particular meanings only in relation to the particular situations of their observers. Another significant implication of the time-space continuum is that space is not independent of matter, things and events. We often imagine that objects fill space and events unfold in it. According to this worldview, space is some structure that exists independently of all the matter and objects 'it contains' and all the events that constantly take place 'within it.' However, this is not the case. After all, what is space if we take away all matter, objects and events? We cannot even imagine one without the other for they are inseparable.

Indeed, it seems to us that space and time exist independently and thus outside of ourselves. The fact, however, is that we experience the perception of space and time and of external physical realities within our consciousness. Consequently, physical reality does not exist 'objectively,' independent of the observers partaking in that reality. Indeed, the very notion of an observer implies the presence of consciousness. ¹¹ Recognizing this situation, many physicists have surmised that what we perceive as 'reality' is a dynamic process that involves our consciousness.

The findings of quantum theory have further undermined the notion of objective knowledge and objective physical realities. The so-called 'double slit-experiment' for instance defies the notion of objectivity and the related subject-object dichotomy. In this experiment, light and matter display dual characteristics: wave and particle. Hence, when we set out to measure electrons as particles they behave as particles, and when we attempt to measure them as waves they behave like waves. So what is the electron: a particle or a wave or both of them at the same time? It is a field of possibilities, a superposition of states. What is noteworthy here is that when a measurement is carried out only one of the possible states of this quantum system can be observed. The single observed state is then identified as the 'reality,' and the other 'realities' fall beyond the observer's purview. Clearly then, this select reality is not objective as it depends directly on the particular way the experiment is designed and executed,

¹⁰ A. H. Reginald Buller, *Punch* (Dec. 19, 1923): 591

¹¹ Alan Wallace, *Hidden Dimensions: The Unification of Physics and Consciousness*, (Columbia University Press, 2007), 109

on how the observer looks and what he chooses to look for. The process of honing in on one of many possibilities is called the 'collapse of the wave function.' Nobody knows how the system 'truly' looks when no one is measuring and therefore observing it, for when we actually look, we can see only one aspect. In other words, we cannot describe the reality of this system independent of the intentions and focus of our own observations. These experiments have not merely demonstrated that we only can see what we look for, but that what we look for influences the activity of physical phenomena itself. For, the very behavior of these quantum systems is to be inextricably connected to the presence of a conscious observer. Without a conscious observer, they appear to exist in the state of a probability state. One astonishing implication of these findings is that the universe, at least as we know it, exists because it is consciously witnessed.

The Quantum Aspect of the Macrocosm

Quantum theory has often been described as 'weird.' Famous quantum physicist Niels Bohr said, "If someone says that he can think about quantum physics without becoming dizzy, that shows only that he has not understood anything whatever about it."¹² But is the macrocosm any less weird and mysterious? It may seem so when we take life and being for granted and imagine that we can figure everything out by attributing life, meaning and consciousness to inanimate and blind matter. However, we cannot even explain lifeless phenomena such as electricity for instance; "science can describe the effects of electricity, but it cannot tell us what electricity is any more than it can tell us what life is or what gravity is."¹³ . Indeed, often scientists subscribe to a deterministic and materialistic worldview in which the subject and object are independent and even alien to each other. Thus, they are understandably shocked by the findings of quantum physics. Upon reflection however, it becomes evident that the macrocosmic world is just as mysterious as the microcosm.

The astonishing conclusions about the nature of particles can be generalized to all matter and energy. When a multitude of sub-atomic particles come together into a visible object, the quantum effects are not noticeable anymore, yet they are still in effect. As Quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg explains,

The statistical features of natural laws are ubiquitous and a matter of principle. It's just that these quantum-mechanical features are far more obvious in atomic structures than in the objects of daily experience.¹⁴

¹² Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar*, (New York: Freeman, 1994), 165

¹³ Lukman Harees, *The Mirage of Dignity on the highways of Human 'Progress': The Bystanders' Perspective* (AuthorHouse, Bloomington, IN, 2012), 321

¹⁴ Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 95

Though the scope of our view might change our capacity to apprehend certain features of reality, it does not mean they are not in effect. For example, even though the curvature of the earth is not noticeable in small tracts of land, the earth is still round.¹⁵ Likewise, though they may not appear to, quantum principles of relativity, possibility, and subject-object interplay also constitute macrocosmic reality.

Consider another intriguing finding of quantum physics: the so-called entanglement principle. Various experiments have shown that once two particles are correlated or ‘entangled,’ they will still influence one another even when separated by arbitrarily large distances. So, when a measurement is performed on one of the pair's spin or momentum, for instance, it is possible to derive information about the corresponding spin or momentum of the other entangled particle, regardless of how far they were separated.

In the macrocosm too, beings—themselves constituted by particles—are in a sense ‘entangled.’ It suffices us, for example, to observe a tiny fruit. At first glance, the fruit looks like a static object existing on its own “out there.” Yet when we look closer, we realize that it grew on a tree, which obviously needs earth, water, air and light to subsist. The tree is affected too by the seasons and hence by the motions of the sun and the earth. It grows according to the laws of physics and chemistry that encompass the whole universe. Moreover, when we eat the fruit, it flows flawlessly through our body, providing sustenance to our cells. The higher our level of consciousness, the more we uncover yet new layers of interconnection or ‘entanglement’ connecting the fruit with ourselves, the world, and to beyond.

Another way in which quantum principles play out in the macrocosm involves the effect of the conscious observer on which potentialities become manifest in the physical world. Particular flowers, for instance, could be perceived as decoration or as medicine depending on the observer’s perspective. As a matter of fact, both possibilities exist potentially at once in the field of being that we call ‘flowers.’ However, the state realized depends on how the observer, or more accurately the participator, perceives the flowers and interacts with them. This interaction is contingent on the participator’s needs, his expectations from the flowers, and thus his state of consciousness in relation to them. Similarly, one person can be a daughter, a mother, a spouse, and a friend at the same time. She can also be both a student and a teacher. To her children she is a mother, and to her parents despite her growth and adoption of many new roles, she remains primarily a daughter. In fact, it would take a conscious effort for her parents to see more than a child in her. This is because we see—and interact with—what we focus on. Even in more fleeting circumstances such as when we give our attention to a particular sound, for example, other sounds that are present seem to recede in the background. The more we focus on that one sound, the less other sounds distract us because they become almost imperceptible. Alternatively, when we pick up an object and give it our full attention, it

¹⁵ The physical process that describes this transition from the quantum realm to the classical realm is known as decoherence

moves to the foreground and everything else retreats into a blurred background. In other words, the moment we choose to look at the world in a certain way, other equally likely aspects become *hidden* to us just as it is with the nature of particles. Are they particles or waves or both? We cannot know how they behave when we are not looking at them, and each time we look, we can only see and measure them as either waves or particles.

Generally speaking, people's perception of the world and of themselves is limited by their present field of consciousness, a kind of frame of reference. Unless their level of consciousness rises wherein they become aware of the manifold of paradigms, contexts and realities in which they operate, those realities remain nonexistent in their view. Whence, they only perceive what they expect to see and overlook the rest. This phenomenon is known as *inattentional blindness* and refers to humans' inability to see what is outside their scope of attention.¹⁶ This phenomenon was explored in the so-called 'invisible gorilla experiment.' Two cognitive psychologists, Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris, conducted an astonishing experiment where approximately two hundred Harvard students were shown a short video in which two basketball teams, one dressed in white and the other in black, passed balls back and forth. The students were asked to count the number of times the white team passed the ball. They started to watch the video and count the passes. After thirty seconds, the movie was stopped, and when asked about the number of passes, the students answered correctly. Then they were asked whether they had noticed anything unusual. The question surprised most of the students: What else could they have noticed? The movie was played a second time, and within ten seconds, they saw someone wearing a gorilla costume show up and walk in the middle of the basketball players. He stopped, looked at the camera, thumped his chest, and walked out. Amazingly, the whole gorilla scene had lasted nine seconds yet the majority of the audience had not noticed it the first time. The second time, when they not only had no particular task to focus on but also had their attention raised by the question of whether they had noticed anything, they all saw the gorilla.¹⁷ When used consciously 'inattentional blindness' is convenient as it provides us with the ability to bracket out distraction and focused on our object of interest. However, when in a state of relative unawareness it can be dangerously misleading to not even be cognizant of the limits of our attention and thus mindlessly conflate our limited, incomplete and thus most probably distorted perception of reality with 'objective and universal reality.'

The concept of inattentional blindness describes quite well the inability of materialists to see beyond matter. Just as the Harvard students failed to see the gorilla when they were intent on counting passes, materialists fail to see authentic aspects of reality when their attention fixes on matter alone. Even more intriguing, the intention to observe material interaction as the fundament of all happenings may actually cause the material aspect of phenomenon to manifest, while the other aspects—we may think of them as potentialities, states, or

¹⁶ Daniel Simons, *But Did You See the Gorilla? The Problem With Inattentional Blindness*, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/but-did-you-see-the-gorilla-the-problem-with-inattentional-blindness-17339778/?no-ist>

¹⁷ Ibid

processes—remain unexpressed or at least imperceptible to the materialist observer. Light measured as particles behaves as particles, but does that mean it is not a wave? If we set out to measure it as one, we find it is. Yet if we only treated it as a particle, we would only see it behave that way and so would feel further confidence in defining it as such, so much that we would perhaps never even know of its reality as a wave.

Now considering the various aspects and potential states of human beings, we ask: Can we be reduced to physical bodies? Isn't there more to being human than the physical? Of course, humans experience emotions and feelings, but what is more telling is that they can be aware of their bodies, thoughts and feelings. That is, humans are mindful, conscious beings. What is it in them that is conscious of the rest of what constitutes them? How sensible is it then for them to identify merely with their physicality or even with their thoughts and feelings, when most of what humans are cannot be touched, seen or experienced with the five senses only? Moreover, even the palpable aspects of humans, like the body undergoes constant changes from babyhood through adulthood. So do thoughts and emotions too change continually. Who or what are humans then? Who am I? Who sees when I see? Who speaks, hears, understands and communicates? Who in me becomes happy or sad in response to a mere word? Who is asking these questions? Who is aware of them? Who is aware of the world out there and of my relationship to it?

When we tune in our observation to the conscious and enduring soul within us and acknowledge it, we become open to seeing in the world those dimensions of being that indicate the unseen and pertain to it. Indeed just as the physical aspects of humans interact with the physical aspects of the world, their conscious spiritual being interacts with the spiritual, *malakut*, dimension of beings. To give a simple analogy, we do not grasp some emotional issue with our rational faculties alone. We may rationalize feelings and attempt to explain them in a reasonable way, but the feelings in themselves are neither rational nor irrational since they belong beyond the realm of reason. Would it make sense to qualify weight as short or long? Or to measure time with a scale? We assess the contours of others' feelings by measuring them against similar feelings in ourselves. That is, we can only understand and empathize with others' feelings to the extent that we ourselves have experienced them or something similar to them. In other words, we can grasp what is external to us to the extent that it resonates with something within us, an internal point of reference. When we are totally unaware of some potential aspects of 'objects,' those aspects tend to not show up in our 'reality,' or more accurately, we remain blind to them. That is, our inner limitations and unawareness restrict what we experience. This state of affairs must have prompted Antoine De Saint-Exupery to declare, "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes."¹⁸ The sufis would add that the heart knows reality but it is the inner heart (*al-fu'ad*) that actually sees reality since *al-fu'ad* is the seat of the vision of reality (*ru'yah*).

¹⁸ Antoine De Saint-Exupery, *Le Petit Prince*, éd. Gallimard jeunesse, coll. Hors luxe, 1951, chap. 21, p. 72
 "On ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux."

Signs: consciousness across realms of matter and meaning

When we look at the world expecting only to see the material dimension, just as in the double-slit experiment, “essential” aspects remain hidden to us. Alternatively, when we look at the world with our inner heart—that is, consciously seeing the spiritual dimension—the physical aspects do not become hidden, but they do transform. We see in them what we had not seen before and they take on new meanings. More specifically we begin to see in them the ability to convey meanings and serve purposes beyond their physical capacities. We come to see how the physical and spiritual realms are not isolated from one another but intricately connected, entangled. That is why we speak of “expanded consciousness,” because it is not either/or, it is not a question of just shifting attention from matter to spirit; rather, our consciousness is capable of *expanding* beyond the physical to encompass multiple realms and even witness their interplay.

Let’s consider the example of spoken words to illustrate this interplay of physicality and spirit. Are spoken words the mere sound waves and energy science describes? From one aspect yes, they are. However, it is obvious that words are much more than that. What is it in them that affects us and makes us respond with joy, sadness, anger, and so on? The meaning assigned to words matters to us. Are they words of love, words of friendship, of hope, of peace or words of hatred, rejection, despair, or humiliation? Moreover, it is not only the words and their literal meaning that matter but also their contextual meaning(s), such as who utters them and with what intention they are spoken. For example, let’s take the following three words, “I love you.” Various factors may contribute to the meaning of these words: the context, who speaks them, to whom, why, and for what purpose, with what intention the speaker says them. Hence clearly, even a few small words are much more than their physical entity (sounds and energy). Why? Because they are signs. They signify something beyond their physicality, in this case, messages conveyed between loved ones. If my child says, “I love you,” those words tell me she cares for me and cherishes me. It is that message of care that moves my heart and fills me with joy, not the words in themselves and definitely not their physical sound. Indeed, we know that the phrase “I love you” is expressed with different sounds in different languages. Yet, as long as those sounds are part of a language, they carry meanings assigned to them within that particular system, and it is those meanings that move the heart, not the sounds. This higher aspect of speech unfolds beyond physical measure. It can even be said that the physical sounds serve the higher purpose of conveying meaning. They are tools to that end. Vocal chords, sound waves, and the structures of the ear interact in the physical plane carrying the interaction of intention and heart on the spiritual plane. That is, the physical aspect of speech is at the service of the spiritual, *malakut*, aspect. In the words of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, matter is

not essential so that existence may be made subject to it, and be dependent on it. Rather, matter subsists through a meaning, and that meaning is life, it is spirit. Also, as may be established through observation, matter is not the thing served so that everything may be ascribed to it. It is rather the servant; it renders service to the process of the perfection of

a truth. And that truth is life. And the fundament of that truth is spirit. Also, as is self-evident, matter is not dominant so that recourse may be made to it or perfections sought from it. Rather, it is dominated; it looks to the decree of some fundament, it is in motion in the way that that decree dictates. And that fundament is life, it is spirit, it is consciousness.¹⁹

Working with the metaphor of language again, one could say the fundament of language is meaning and that in written text, letters render service to it. Of course, technically (and physically) letters are shapes, but we would totally miss the purpose of creating alphabets if we claimed that letters were only shapes and nothing more. Moreover, not all shapes are letters. What makes a ‘shape’ into a letter is the meaning assigned to it within a language system. To consider letters simply as shapes obfuscates what they really are because such a claim misses the most important function of letters, which is to construct words and sentences that convey meaning.

In the Quran, beings are repeatedly referred to as *ayaat* or signs just like the Quranic units themselves. That is, the Quran consists of verbal signs that refer to creational activity in the world as non-verbal signs. Accordingly, there are two types of divine speech, verbal speech also known as scripture (*al-kalām al-tadwīnī*) and the speech of creation (*al-kalām al-takwīnī*). Both are essential for human beings to become fully conscious, capable of witnessing both the physical and spiritual aspects of the universe, and thus understand the meaning of existence. When we are unaware that beings are signs indicating an unseen reality, when we look at a rose not as a sign but exclusively as a rose, we may perceive many of its facets, such as its beauty, artistry, and healing properties, yet remain unmindful to how those facets signify meanings beyond themselves, meanings that pertain to the divine. This situation is similar to seeing, measuring, analyzing, and even admiring shapes, but remaining completely unaware they are actually letters brought about for the purpose of signifying meanings beyond themselves. In such a case, even the highest admiration for their aesthetic, for all the curves and swirls, could not bring us anywhere near appreciating their value as signifiers or understanding their real meaning.

As signs, beings too have a signifier aspect and a signified one. Let us first consider a linguistic example. The combined letters “r-o-s-e” are the signifier, which indicates the signified, a physical being out there in the world. When I say “*gül*” (rose in Turkish), I am still referring to the same physical being out there in the world. The words are spelled differently and sound different (*rose, gül*) yet they indicate the same object, because they are two signifiers to the same signified. The fact that so many distinct words refer to the same object shows that the words in themselves do not matter so much; what matters is the point of reference, in this case, the physical rose. Indeed, the symbol or word may change but not the signified. In other words, signs

¹⁹ Nursi, *The Words*, 526.

have no meaning in themselves; they are like mirrors reflecting the signified. If roses did not exist, there would be no word to signify them. A sign therefore indicates something beyond itself. What the Quran tells us is that just as the word ‘rose’ signifies the physical rose, the physical rose *itself* is also a *sign*, an *aya* indicating something beyond itself. In itself it is transient and perishable; it has no transcendental and enduring aspect. Likewise, all beings and phenomena, as well as all creative activity are signifiers that convey signified meanings; they comprise a kind of divine speech.²⁰ They are *ayaat* signifying enduring meanings beyond themselves, meanings that pertain to the realm of the unseen, the realm of the beautiful divine names (*al-asma’ al-husna*). As such, all creative activity is a kind of language and unless the ‘subject’ is aware that it is indeed a language, she cannot even begin to recognize its meaning. Even then, one must cultivate a certain proficiency in the language of creational signs to truly comprehend and appreciate what they convey.

The Quran emphasizes the importance of understanding creational signs. It repeatedly declares that “in all things in the heavens and on earth” there are signs. Do not pass them by, it warns—do not, by analogy, think of letters as mere shapes—lest you miss the true purpose of their creation, lest you miss the message they convey. When we read words, we must apprehend the meaning that emerges from specific arrangements of letters, words and sentences. Likewise, reading creational beings and phenomena involves contemplating the relation between the various signs. How they are ordered, related, contextualized with one another gives rise to the meanings they convey. So when we see rain as a sign, we contextualize it amongst the other signs: the orbits of the moon and earth, the alternation between night and day, the growth of various plants, the food we and animals eat. We see rain not just as water falling from the clouds but as a phenomenon elegantly intertwined with the movements of both celestial bodies and the life and landscapes of the earth.

In this way we learn what it means to be conscious of the signs around us, and we begin to see how every living being is connected to the rest of the universe. Each is dependent on the earth, water, air, sunlight, the seasons and the laws of physics and chemistry. Each being, a rose for example, can only exist along with the whole universe. If it had expanded too fast, if ancient stars had not died and yielded their dust, if the earth were not just this distance from the sun, a single rose would not exist. In other words, for one thing to be, the whole universe must have come to be just as it is. Yet nothing in the universe, not the earth, the water, the air, or the sun has the knowledge and power to control its own existence, to coordinate its processes, or sustain itself, nor do any of them possess the ability to create life, to for instance, bring a rose into being and sustain its existence. All these beings are in the same position as the rose itself;

²⁰“The activity of [divine] power in the cosmos and the flow of beings is so meaningful in that the All-Wise Maker is making all the beings in universe speak through such activity... Thus, the dynamism and transience in the cosmos...is a speech glorifying God. The constant activity in the universe is a silent speech...”
Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Letters*, Tr. S. Vahide, (Istanbul, 2001), 339-40

each is interconnected with other beings and phenomena and thus needs all of them for its existence. Each is utterly lacking in knowledge, power and life. And it is precisely in this way—through the combination of their powerlessness and intricacy—that each being declares that its maker can be none less than *the Maker* of the whole universe. Their very mode of existence points to a transcendent maker, and in the artistry of their movement and design, they speak of Him and exhibit His attributes. They are signs indicating the divine names. Their very being serves at once as testimony (*shahadah*) to the existence and work of the all-knowing and all-powerful giver of life and as glorification (*tasbih*) of Him and His attributes.

The wisdom (*hikma*) needed to understand creational speech is a divine gift.²¹ The gifting presupposes a receiver of the gift. This receiving depends on the receiver's readiness and capacity to receive the wisdom; that is, it depends on her intention and awareness, or level of consciousness. Wisdom (signified by the *ayaan*) is sent as a mercy (*rahma*) to those who surrender wholeheartedly to their *rabb*. That is we can only 'read' the signs in the outer world to the extent that their meanings are revealed unto us. According to the saying, "whoever knows himself, knows God," the self functions as a frame of reference in connecting with the creation and subsequently with the creator. In a sense, it is as though the signs are like treasures to which we hold the key. That key is tied to our self-perception. Indeed, there is no 'meaning' out there apart from the self that is observing and understanding. Furthermore, inasmuch as the world is like a mirror to the 'I,' what it reflects to us is often filtered through our perceptions and pre-understandings. The human experience, the self is the unit of measure that we use to reveal the existence of something else.

At first, we come to share our attributes with God, concluding that since we have power, then so too must God, albeit on a much greater scale. At this level of self-perception, we believe that we can create, that we have some power over the attributes of perfection. Along the way however, we are led to realize that we own nothing. The power we appear to exercise over 'our attributes' is in fact an illusion. What we initially perceived as our attributes are but reflections that reveal the real attributes of the maker. For example, when we feel compassion we no longer regard it as "our" compassion generated by our "self," but as something that springs up within us without our control. We realize compassion is but sent *through* us from the one true source of compassion. This realization of the true owner of all the beautiful names leads to the submission of the "I," the defining point of the spiritual journey to truly know God. This submission is characterized by restoring the trust (*amanah*) and handing it over to its true and only owner, and eventually abandoning all claims to lordship (*rubūbiyya*). Consequently, man remembers his inherent servanthood (*'ubūdiyya*) and as a result acknowledges the one true lord (*rabb*). He acknowledges that his existence is totally dependent on the sustenance from his lord.²² Through this process, the human self is realized as a conscious mirror and a locus of the reflections of divine names. In the words of Ibn Arabi,

²¹ He grants wisdom unto whom He wills: and whoever is granted wisdom has indeed been granted abundant good. But none bears this in mind save those who are endowed with insight. (Quran, 2:269)

²² Ibn 'Arabi, *Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, Cairo edn, 1329H., I, p. 370

The analogy of a mirror is the closest and most faithful one for a vision of a divine Self-revelation. Try, when you look at yourself in a mirror, to see the mirror itself, and you will find that you cannot do so. So much is this the case that some have concluded that the image perceived is situated between the mirror and the eye of the beholder . . . In your seeing your true self, He is your mirror and you are His mirror in which He sees His Names and their determinations, which are nothing other than Himself. The whole matter is prone to intricacy and ambiguity.²³

In itself, the self carries no meaning, and exists only to reveal the existence of the absolute one.²⁴ Drawing on the hadith, “God created Adam in His own form,”²⁵ Ibn Arabi explains how man serves as a mirror image to the divine. Moreover, since God taught Adam all the names as stated in the Quran (2:30), he concludes that man being created in God’s form actually means that God created man in the form of the divine names. It is because of this quality that human beings have been appointed as vicegerents (*khalīfa*) on earth. ‘The *khilāfa* was assigned to Adam,’ Ibn Arabi asserts, ‘to the exclusion of the other creatures of the universe, because God created him in His form. The vicegerent must necessarily appear, to those amongst whom he exercises this function, in the image of the one who has appointed him. Otherwise he is not truly his vicegerent amongst them.’²⁶ When his potential *khilāfa* is actualized, man regains his primordial form of ‘best conformation’²⁷ (*ahsan taqweem*) and becomes actually a conscious mirror wherein God contemplates Himself. Ibn Arabi further explains that

The Reality wanted to see the essences of His Most Beautiful Names, or, to put it another way, to see His own Essence, in an all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery . . . Adam was the very principle of reflection for the mirror and the spirit of that form, while the angels were only certain faculties of that form which was the form of the Cosmos, called in the terminology of the Folk, the Perfect Man . . . So he is called Vice-regent, for by him God preserves His creation, as the seal preserves the king’s treasure.²⁸

The Witnessing

In order to achieve the state of Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) the surrendering (*muslim*) wayfarer travels through rising levels of consciousness. Consciousness describes a quiet, still,

²³ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Bezels of Wisdom*, Tr. R.W.J. Austin (Paulist Press, 1980), 65

²⁴ Nursi, *The Words*, Treatise of the “I”, 557-70

²⁵ Bukhari (6227) and Muslim (2841) narrated the hadith from Abu Hurayrah who reported that the Prophet (pbuh) said: “God created Adam in His image/form (*‘ala suratih*)...”

²⁶ *Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, Cairo edn, 1329H. I, p. 263

²⁷ Verily, We create man in the best conformation, (Quran, 95:4)

²⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Bezels of Wisdom*, 50-51

yet deeply alive aspect of being. It does not involve gross action or effort, yet it is not passive or asleep. It is awake, aware; it bears witness. First the wayfarer makes *shahada*, he witnesses the witnessing of the signs ‘in the horizons’ and then ‘within himself,’ until he finally witnesses his own witnessing. I will explore these different levels of witnessing within the framework of the interaction between the subject (wayfarer) and object (creational signs) and how by actively incorporating the Quran’s teachings and guidance into his life, the wayfarer rises through higher levels of consciousness.

When the Quran declares, “Then let man look at his sustenance” (Quran, 80:24),²⁹ what does such a wayfarer do? When it says food is a blessing, he reflects on what that means. Often, a blessing is understood as a static gift that exists out there, independently of me and for which I am grateful to the extent that I appreciate it. But how is the blessing of food an *aya*? A sign points to something beyond itself, so what does food point to? We cannot perceive the deeper meaning(s) of food or any object without being conscious of its various aspects, of its interconnection with us and with the rest of creation. Initially, food seems to have meaning in itself and for itself. At this stage, I have no way to actually witness that it is a gift of the lord of all worlds (*rabbul al-alameen*), let alone be aware of the messages it potentially carries from its lord. Then how do we confirm that food, a fruit for instance, is indeed a sign to the unseen, a sign that makes its maker known through His beautiful names?

We start by exploring the signs by seeing the fruit, touching it, smelling and eating it. As we do so, we reflect on the impact the fruit has on us. We notice how its shape and color incite feelings of joy within us. It seems to satisfy our hunger making us feel content. We also appreciate its taste, which may make us wonder about our tongue and how our taste buds function. This trail of signs within signs prompts us to realize that we are not separate from the fruit even before we consume it. Our interaction with food as merely objects that satisfy our hunger was an illusion due to our unawareness (*ghaflah*). We realize we are connected with food at many different levels only one of which comes through our need for sustenance. In fact, each need we experience—from our physical hunger to our yearning for beauty, love, and meaning—connects us to the rest of creation in manifold ways. Our needs motivate us to connect with the world and also make us aware of all the ways in which we are being sustained. For example, our hunger for food makes us conscious of the fruit and of its impact on us. This awareness brings us to yet another level of interaction with the fruit and with the world. We start grasping and actually sensing the meaning of our interconnectedness with all beings and all phenomena. Indeed only the Maker of all the universe could provide us with sustenance because even for a single fruit to exist, the whole universe has to exist; they are inseparable. In addition, many other things are involved in the eating process, such as the

²⁹ Then let human look at his sustenance. * For that We pour forth water in abundance. * And We split the earth into fragments. * And We produce therein corn, * And grapes and nutritious plants, * And olives and dates, * And enclosed gardens, dense with lofty trees, * And fruits and fodder, * For use and convenience to you and your cattle. (Quran, 80:24-32)

complex processes of digesting, which co-exist with many other life-sustaining systems in the human body. Moreover, we observe that food can enter any living body and work there perfectly. The food is digested and the body receives all of what is nutritional and eliminates what is not. So we understand that it cannot be the food or water or the earth or any other created being that is coordinating all these purposeful activities in order to feed us as well as all other living beings.³⁰

We thus fulfill the first part of the shahada: we witness that these components of creation such as food, air, water and so on cannot be our sustainers. At this stage, we are ready to consciously witness the comprehensive creational activity through the window or aya of food, which we now appreciate as a precious and extremely valuable gift (worth the whole universe). We now can truly feel that we are being fed and provided for.³¹ As we begin to truly know our *Rabb*, we become filled with a genuine, deep gratitude toward Him from which we praise His generosity, munificence and compassion. For now the sign of food has started to reveal its messages to us, or we could say that we have started to open up to receiving its messages, which consequently unfold within us. We realize how our *Rabb* is generous, compassionate, and all-knowing. We see that He has power over all things, and that we are his servants, that is, we realize servanthood (*ubudiya*) not as a normative way to be but as our genuine ontological being.

It is when we can observe food in interconnection with the rest of the world that we can witness the signs (*ayaat*). That is, as we become conscious of our needs, and therefore of our interconnection with the rest of the universe, we begin to perceive the world in a new light. It dawns on us that it is not food in and of itself that constitutes the sign but actually *our relationship* with the food through our need and hunger. The hunger satisfied through the provision of food leads us to witness the Provider and Giver. That is, the intricate interactions between the subject and object is what constitutes the dynamic sign that speaks of its lord (*Rabb*) and praises Him by mirroring His attributes of perfection. Becoming conscious of this relationship we begin to wonder and ask questions, ‘Who is feeding me and all living beings with this food knowingly and compassionately? Who is providing for our needs so generously and graciously?’ Then, it is revealed unto us who our sustainer, our lord (*rabb*) is through the

³⁰ Will they, then,- ascribe divinity, side by side with Him, unto beings that cannot create anything 'since they themselves are being created (Quran, 7:191)

Those whom they invoke beside God cannot create anything, since they themselves are being created (Quran, 16:20)
Say: “Have you [really] given thought to what it is that you invoke instead of God? Show me what they have created anywhere on earth! (Quran, 46:4)

O people! A parable is set forth [herewith]; hearken, then, to it! Behold, those whom you invoke instead of God will never create [as much as] a fly, even if they were to join all their forces to that end! And if a fly robs them of anything, they cannot [even] rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and [weak] the sought! (Quran, 22:73)

³¹ Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) declared, “the Sustainer of all the worlds who has created me and is the One who guides me and is the One who gives me to eat and to drink, and when I fall ill, is the One who restores me to health.” (Quran, 26:78-80)

testimony of the food and its interactions with the rest of the world. At this stage, we witness the witnessing of the food: the food bears witness to the divine as it carries messages from its Provider, telling how caring, compassionate and generous a Host He is, how He is the living one who sustains life and tends to its needs. Thus as a sign, food becomes the bearer of the divine messages and a mirror reflecting the divine names in such a way that we can read them, taste them, and witness them. This is how we witness the witnessing of beings, the witnessing of the realm of witnessing (*alam al-shahada*) to the extent that we are conscious of our interactions with food, which is concomitant with our being conscious of our neediness and powerlessness, our *faqr* and *'ajz*.

At this point, our love for the food becomes itself a sign pointing to the provider and it transforms into love for the provider of the food. In other words, as we become conscious that food is a sign to our common provider, then the heart turns to the provider Himself and loves food in the name of the provider, that is, as a mirror to the provider. Thus witnessing the signs out there (food) leads to witnessing the signs within ourselves (love). Moreover, when we witness the signs in the 'horizons' while simultaneously witnessing the signs within ourselves, truth and reality (*haqq*) become clear in a *shuhudi* manner as indicated in the following Quranic verse,

In time We shall show them our ayaat [through what they perceive] in the horizons and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. [Still,] is it not enough [for them to know] that thy Sustainer is witness unto everything? (Quran, 41:53)

When what we observe becomes consistent with what we believe, without contradictions, the messages of the signs become clear. For instance, if it seems to me that it is food that satisfies my hunger because I reason that without food I would remain hungry, but I still say that God is the creator of everything, at this level of consciousness my belief is not *shuhudi* because my observation (*mushahada*) seems to contradict my unsupported belief. In other words, we truly fulfill the witnessing (*shahada*) when our thoughts (*ma'qulaat*) and senses (*hissiyyaat*) are aligned with the reality (*haqiqa*) in complete unity (*tawhid*) without any room for shirk (ascribing partners with God). That is when our observations (*mushahadat*) concur and confirm our belief. Only then can we truly declare, "I witness that there is no deity except God;" "I witness that there is no provider but God," and so on... When I truly witness the testimony of the above Quranic *aya*, then I will be ready to witness my witnessing and realize that there is ultimately no witness except God. The following *qudsi* hadith describe the state of the seeker in this station (*maqam*),

My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the duties that I have imposed upon him; and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I would love him. And when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his leg with which he walks. Were he to ask of Me, I would surely give him; and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant it to him. ³²

The Witness

One cannot refrain from asking: who is this witness who witnesses the witnessing of other beings as well as his own? What is this consciousness that witnesses the witnessing? When we set on the journey toward self-realization, we start identifying with something beyond our physical entity, beyond our thoughts and emotions. Beyond we find the silence of consciousness. So far, the subject and object merge through the interplay of reflecting the divine names. They are the locus of the divine disclosure and the embodiment of the beautiful names. Often this state is described by means of the metaphor of a mirror reflecting the divine names. This metaphor helps us probe into the nature of the reflection: it is not God yet it is not other than Him either. But what or who is the mirror? The recipient of the divine creativity. The mirror has been likened to darkness reflecting light. In other words, human poverty and neediness (*faqr*) and human powerlessness (*'ajz*) are like degrees of obscurity acting like mirrors to divine perfection, to God's power and mercy. The mirror is darkness; it is neediness; it is lack and therefore it does not exist in itself. Indeed there is no light but Him and no Knowing but Him and no witness but Him. So far, we have seen how we are made to appreciate things through our needs for them whereby we are filled with gratitude for them. Now we begin to witness that there is no appreciator (*shakir*) but Him for He sends both the blessings and the appreciation felt through them. Similarly, we are led to witness that He alone is the Witness and the Witnessed.³³ The subject - object connection becomes the ultimate sign to the reality that there is no Witness except Him. That is when we move beyond the subject-object dichotomy, we actually move beyond the duality of I versus He (God), wherein the 'I' becomes like a shadow, a mirror-reflection of He; that is the 'I' in itself and for itself dissolves and there remains only He. 'I' becomes the silent witness dwelling in the divine presence. The moment 'I' utters a word, it leaves that presence; it becomes 'itself'.

The realm of divine presence is a realm of silence, a realm beyond thoughts as Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rumi expressed in his Mathnawi,

At times my state resembles sleep: a misguided person may think it is sleep.

³² Recorded by Al-Bukhari in Kitab Ar-Raqai'iq (Book on Heart Softeners), hadith no. 6502.

³³ In his commentary on aya 3 of surah 85, Al-Tustari writes, "[85:3] and [by] the witness and the witnessed, He said: It has been said that the witness (shāhid) is the angel, just as He has also said, [and every soul will be accompanied by] a driver and a witness [50:21]. That which is borne witness to (*mashhūd*) is the Day of Resurrection, for that is a day that is [indeed] witnessed (*wa dhālika yawmun mashhūdun*). Ibn 'Abbās said, 'The witness is Muḥammad, and that which is witnessed is the Qur'ān.' It has also been said that that which is witnessed is mankind. Sahl said: The witness is the spiritual self (*nafs al-rūḥ*) and that which is witnessed is the natural self (*nafs al-tab'*), for the natural self, along with the understanding of the intellect (*fahm al-'aql*) and the discernment of the heart (*fiṭnat al-qalb*), will each have their witness, while God is the ever-present Witness (*al-Shahīd*) over everything."

Sahl b. 'Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, Tr A. Keeler & A. Keeler (Fons Vitae, 2011), 276

Know that my eyes are asleep, (but) my heart is awake: know that my (seemingly) inactive form is (really) in action. The Prophet said, "My eyes sleep, (but) my heart is not asleep to the Lord of created beings." Your eyes are awake, and your heart is sunk in slumber; my eyes are asleep, (but) my heart is in (contemplation of) the opening of the door (of Divine grace). My heart hath five senses other (than the physical): both the worlds (external and spiritual) are the stage (theatre) for the senses of the heart. Do not regard me from (the standpoint of) your infirmity: to you 'tis night, to me that same night is morningtide. To you 'tis prison, to me that prison is like a garden: to me the most absolute state of occupation (with the world) has become (a state of spiritual) freedom.

Your feet are in the mud; to me the mud has become roses. You have mourning; I have feasting and drums. (Whilst) I am dwelling with you in some place on the earth, I am coursing over the seventh sphere (of Heaven). . . . 'Tis not that I am seated beside you, 'tis my shadow: my rank is higher than (the reach of) thoughts, Because I have passed beyond (all) thoughts, and have become a swift traveler outside (the region of) thought.³⁴

In that realm of silent consciousness, there is only conscious being; there is no place for one or two. There is only the ever-present and eternal.

A certain person came to the Friend's door
and knocked.
"Who's there?"
"It's me."
The Friend answered, "Go away. There's no place
for raw meat at this table."
The individual went wandering for a year.
Nothing but the fire of separation
can change hypocrisy and ego. The person returned
completely cooked,
walked up and down in front of the Friend's house,
gently knocked.
"Who is it?"
"You."
"Please come in, my self,
there's no place in this house for two."³⁵

³⁴ *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, EJ.W. Gibb Memorial Series, n.s. 4 (London: Luzac & Co., 1926), 2:405-406.

³⁵ Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, Tr Coleman Barks, (Castle Books, 1995), 87

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