
Recep Şentürk¹

Semiotics of Nature: Recharging the World with Meaning

The world is built with
two letters: “kāf” and “nūn”.

Chief Architect Sinan (1498–1588)
Tezkiretu'l-Bünyan

Can the efforts to discover causal relations in nature be combined with the efforts to understand its meaning?² Are these two efforts compatible or mutually exclusive? Some answer this question positively while others answer it negatively. For those who answer this question negatively, exploring causal relations to reach an explanation is the only way to study nature. Positivism holds that the issue should be approached in this fashion; this is also a view that prevails in present day academia. Positivists are convinced that there is no meaning in nature. Thus, they believe that any interest in the meaning of nature constitutes heresy in science. The author will challenge this view in this article and argue the opposite: Exploring causal relations and deciphering the meaning inherent in nature are complimentary to each other.

The author will use the examples of İbrahim Hakkı (1703–1780) and Said Nursi (1873–1960), both of whom tried to demonstrate in their works that causal and interpretive study of nature should be carried together. Their works reflect the clash between the positivist and the traditional view of nature and science. It would be wrong to see İbrahim Hakkı and Said Nursi as opponents of science per se, rather they were opponents of the positivist explanation and interpretation of nature.

However, the positivist view has dominated scientific culture and academia, something which has resulted in the rejection of the traditional view of nature as a meaningful book. This has resulted in the relationship between humankind and the natural world changing from one of stewardship to one characterized by the

1 R.Ş. thanks Şerif Mardin for his encouragement and valuable comments while writing this paper.

2 In this article, the author uses “nature” interchangeably with “creation” because, in his understanding, both concepts overlap in the final analysis. R.Ş. is aware that “nature” and “creation” are generally used in the literature with different connotations. However, here, he uses them synonymously.

wish to control and exploit nature. The outcome has been catastrophic, as mankind faces environmental problems all over the world.

Man now needs to restructure his relationship with nature, and return to one of stewardship. This requires him to reconfigure his view of science and nature. The author argues that humankind needs to recharge nature with meaning so that a meaningful relationship with it can be established. This may lay the foundation of a new environmental ethics based on a meaningful relationship with nature. İbrahim Hakkı and Said Nursi are significant in this context because they tried to show how this could be done without compromising or sacrificing serious scientific research for causal explanation of natural phenomena.

1. Is nature a text?

What is a rose? The answer offered by natural sciences will not satisfy anyone. Something botanic is missing: It is the symbolic side that is charged, almost universally, to the plant called rose. The rose is a sign³ of beauty and love; it is the symbolic queen of all flowers. Its looks and smells touche something inside of us. This is what botanic plants exude. Human, says İbrahim Hakkı, is the scent of the rose garden called universe. Who is a human? Again, our natural sciences will miss the symbolic dimension when trying to answer this question. This brings to mind a more general question: Are things to ordinary humans more than what they are to objective scientists? If so, why is this the case? How did a gap emerge between the ordinary and scientific view of things? Or, in other words, how did modern science pre-empt/vacate the symbolic meaning of nature? This is a recent phenomenon in human history, and one that has not prevailed without first overcoming the traditional view of nature as something more than its material and observable qualities and relations.

One of the greatest Sufis and scholars of the 18th century, İbrahim Hakkı of Erzurum dedicated his *magnum opus*, the *Marifetname*,⁴ to convincing his

3 Charles Sanders Pierce (1839–1914) wrote: “A sign is an object which stands for another to some mind”; James Hoopes (ed.), *Pierce on Signs*, Chapel Hill 1991, p. 141. Pierce is a logician who challenged the conventional models of human thought. He approached them as “signs”, external to the self and without meaning unless they were interpreted by subsequent thoughts. Pierce talked about the “demonstrative application” of objects mediated by human mind. He wrote: “[...] an idea is an object and it represents an object. The idea itself has its material quality which is the feeling which there is in thinking. Thus the red and blue are different in the mere sensation. Thus our mere sensations are only the material quality of our ideas considered as signs”, *ibid.*, p. 143.

4 İbrahim Hakkı, who is well-known as a Sufi poet and philosopher, wrote 15 works on a variety of subjects: *Divan*, *Marifetname*, *İrfaniyye: Mecmuatu'l-irfaniyye fi Marifet-i Nefsi'r-Rabbaniyye*, *İnsaniyye: Mecmuatu'l-insaniyye fi Marifet-i'l-Vahdaniyye*, *Mecmuatu'l-Meani*, *Meşa-*

readers that the world is a text symbolically authored by God and addressed exclusively to humanity. Why did İbrahim Hakkı undertake such a task at this particular time? The author argues that it is plausible to believe that this endeavor was prompted by the arrival of the modern view of nature to the Ottoman world. After the first encounter with the modern science, İbrahim Hakkı tried to vindicate and revive the traditional semiotics of nature from an Islamic-Sufi perspective by showing that the two are not mutually exclusive, as each one belongs to a certain level of existence. İbrahim Hakkı thus advocated that reading nature as a book, from the perspective of the comprehensive theory of “indication” (*dalāla*), would not necessarily contradict attempts to analyze nature in a scientific fashion. He also argued that rival paradigms in science should not be evaluated from a religious perspective, and should instead be judged on their own merit.⁵

Prior to listening to the arguments of İbrahim Hakkı to prove so, one has to ask *what was a text for him?* Unless one is familiar with the concept of text that İbrahim Hakkı shared with his readers in the Ottoman cultural milieu during his lifetime, one will not be able to make full sense of his concept of nature. Yet he makes no effort to explain his understanding of ‘text’ since he assumes that it is already known to his readers. However, we are now living in a period long after İbrahim Hakkı’s death and therefore need to make an extra effort to familiarize ourselves with the concept of ‘text’ as it was understood by the Ottoman public at that time.

Therefore, first a brief comparison between semiotics in the West and Islam will be given in order to clarify what is understood by ‘text’, ‘reading’ and ‘meaning’ in the *Marifetname*. The author will then present the multiplex structure of the world and, in accordance with it, the multiplex structure of sciences from the perspective of İbrahim Hakkı. Due to space constrictions, a broad picture has to be painted. The author would thus like to be excused for leaving many important details untouched in this article.

rıku'l-Ruh, Sefinetü'r-Ruh min Varidati'l-Futuh, Kenzu'l-Futuh, Definetü'r-Ruh, Ruhü'ş-Şuruh, Urvetü'l-İslam, Heyetü'l-İslam, Tuhfetu'l-Kiram, Nuhbetü'l-Kelam, Ülfetü'l-Enam. Mustafa Çağırıcı, “İbrahim Hakkı Erzurumî”, in: *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 21, pp. 309–311.

5 See for instance, İbrahim Hakkı, *Marifetname*, Matbaa-i Ahmed Kamil, Istanbul 1330 AH/1911–12 CE, p. 24. He mentions that the view of Muslim philosophers on the world is based on rational argument (*burhân-ı aqlî*). This statement makes it explicit that he follows the methodology of earlier Muslim philosophers such as Gazâli regarding the study of the world from a scientific and rational perspective.

2. Semiotics: Study of signification

The process through which signs are interpreted by the minds to which they are addressed is called *signification* in English and *dalāla* in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish. The emergence of the former concept (*signification*) is quite recent compared to the latter (*dalāla*) which originated during the first century of *hiğra* or the seventh century AD. The theory of was applied at first to the text of the Koran and *hadīt* by the jurists who deduced norms from them, and then later to nature and human actions. In the *Marifetname*, İbrahim Hakkı also searches for the *dalāla* (*symbolic indication*) of the external nature and the body.

In the West, the theory of the relationship between sign and object can be traced back to the work of Pierce (1839–1914). William James (d. 1910) revered him as the inventor of the word ‘pragmatism’. Pierce defined pragmatism as “a method of ascertaining the meaning of *hard words* and abstract conceptions.”⁶ The doctrine of thought-signs first originated from his works. He wrote, “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.”⁷

Structuralism has applied a relational approach to text and society during the last century. It first emerged in the work of a linguist, Saussure (1857–1913),⁸ who claimed that the relationship between the sign and the object is arbitrary. Four decades later it brought about a reconstruction of the concept of society based on a relational model in the work of a prominent anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009). This signified a revolutionary movement from essentialist to relational approach in the linguistic, literary and social theory. Semiotics, as the work of Roland Barthes⁹ illustrates very well, later assumed the task of interpreting social phenomena with the same methods employed to interpret the text. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White claimed that the form or genre has a content.¹⁰

6 *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. V, p. 464; cited by W. B. Gallie, *Pierce and Pragmatism*, Harmondsworth 1952, p. 11 [italics: R. Ş.].

7 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

8 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, tr. Roy Harris, La Salle/Illinois 1994, pp. 110–120.

9 Roland Barthes, *Semiotic Challenge*, tr. Richard Howard, Berkeley 1994.

10 He writes, “It is this complex multilayeredness of discourse and it is consequent capacity to bear a wide variety of interpretations of its meaning that performance model of discourse seeks to illuminate. From this perspective provided by this model, a discourse is regarded as an apparatus for the production of meaning rather than as only a vehicle for transmission of information about an extrinsic referent”; Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore 1987, p. 42.

The parallelism between the concept of society and text can also be observed during the second century of *hiġra* in the works of Sibawayh (177/798)¹¹ and Abū Ḥanīfa (80–150/699–767), both of whom adopted a relational approach to their subject matters, language and society respectively. Later, the *fuqahā*, doctors of Islamic law, made linguistic study and interpretive analysis a part of their discipline. Yet the primary focus of the *fuqahā* has always been “action” (*amal*) as it bears on the rights and duties in social relations. Abū Ḥanīfa defined *fiqh* as the study of rights and duties by individuals. It is evident that rights and duties are relational concepts which can exist only in a society.

Based on these two observations, we can safely conclude that our image of text is connected to our image of society, even if we are not aware of it. In Europe, the study of solitary words by using philological methods characterized the pre-structural period in Linguistics. In a similar way, the study of individual action characterized the study of society during the same period. The pieces began to be perceived as a part of a general system initially in language and then in society with the rise of structuralism and systems theory during the 20th century. The great linguist Sibawayh postulated that text must be studied as an interrelated system with multiple relations. Abū Ḥanīfa also perceived social actors as being part of a social system, and not as isolated individuals.

Yet the issue aimed to be explored in this paper is the relationship between our concept of text and nature. Does one project his concept of text onto nature as one does for society as a whole? Does the changing concept of text also change the concept of nature as it does for society? Was there a period during which nature was perceived as a text? If so, why did this concept not last into the modern era?

The Muslim thinkers perceived the world as *‘alam*, which literally means “sign”.¹² The *‘alam* is defined as everything other than God, and thus stands as a sign for His existence, providence, knowledge and power. When looked at from this perspective, there is no difference between nature and society. Even the word *‘alam* is used to denote nature and society, while the word *ġumla* is used to indicate both a sentence and a society. As each verse in the Koran is considered a sign (*āya*) so are things in nature. This view of nature was inevitably going to clash with the modern scientific view of nature, which assumed that scientific and semiotic study of nature are implicitly mutually exclusive.

11 For Sibawayh as the founder of Arabic Linguistics, see G. Bohas/J.-P. Guillaume/D. E. Kou-loughli, *The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*, New York 1990, pp. 31–48; Kees Versteegh, *Land-marks in Linguistic Thought*, III, New York 1997, pp. 36–51.

12 On the concept of *‘alam* (world) and the way it is used in Islamic theology as a sign for the existence of the Creator, see for instance, al-Nasafī, Abi al-Barakāt ‘Abdullah, *Tafstr al-Nasafī: Madārik al-Tanzīl wa Haqāiq al-Ta’wīl*, ed. Yusūf ‘Alī Badīvi, Dār al-Kalīm al-Tayyib, Da-mascus and Beirut 1426 AH, p. 30.

The author will argue that while society in general has been linguistified/textualized by semiotics, modern science has continued to delinguistify/detextualize nature. The early modern scientific view of the world as hard facts was thus at least partially surpassed as regards society as whole but not as regards nature. The change in mankind's concept of nature can be summarized as detextualization or delinguistification of nature. In other words, the rise and spread of modern science silenced what Rūmī called the "mute eloquence" of nature by emptying it from the symbolic meanings which traditional cultures all over the world have, to a greater or lesser extent, traditionally attributed to it.¹³

Early in this century, Weber observed this process, which progressed parallel to processes of modernization. For him, this supposed the disenchantment of humanity from the world. Weber proposed no solution to the destruction of the meaning inherent in structures by modern rational scientific view. However, Habermas, who also observed a similar process in social life as the systems colonized the "life world" (*Lebenswelt*), undertook a project which he calls "linguistification" of social theory. Other sociologists are also becoming more and more aware that the hard facts are no longer enough for an authentic understanding of social processes.¹⁴

İbrahim Hakki provides us with an interesting example of the encounter between two concepts of nature, one charged with meaning, while the other is charged with no meaning at all, one is mute while the other is speaking. He attempted to obliterate the new approach by internalizing it in the older one and thus rebuild the world for the Turkish speaking Muslim public of the 18th century. It may be seen as an attempt to retextualize nature, which was threatened with losing its textuality or more simply put its meaning. He was recharging nature with meaning and showing people how nature's speech could be understood in this new, more turbulent period. He did not see modern science as a threat to the traditional concept of nature but rather a new unfolding of nature's meaning which had previously been hidden far from view in the book of nature.

The influence of modern science on the concept of nature was also felt among Indian Muslims in the Eastern part of the Islamic world. An 18th century Indian Muslim scholar, Şāh Waliyyullāh ad-Diḥlawī¹⁵ (1176/1762), attempted in a similar effort, in his magnum opus *Huğğat Allah al-bālīgah*, to revive the traditional view of the world. Şāh Waliyyullāh ad-Diḥlawī does not make explicit reference to modern science but his life project within this particular conjecture to revive the

13 See the works of Eliade and Campbell, in particular, Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, I–III, tr. Willard R. Trask, Chicago 1978; Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*, I–IV, London 1969.

14 Robert Hodge/Gunther Kress, *Social Semiotics*, Oxford 1988.

15 Abū 'Abdal'aziz Şāh Waliyyullāh Aḥmad b. 'Abdurrahīm ad-Diḥlawī, *Huğğatullāh al-bālīgah*, ed. Muḥammed Şarīf Suqqar, Dar Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm, Beirut 1990.

traditional Islamic cosmology can be attributed to an awareness about the new world view promoted by modern science. There are other works on the Islamic ontology or *marātib al-wuġūd*¹⁶ during the 18th century which may also have been prompted by the arrival of modern science.

3. Semiotics of nature in İbrahim Hakkı's work

The dominant imagery used by İbrahim Hakkı to represent the nature is a book. It is intentionally written by God to manifest His existence, providence, omnipotence and omniscience. For him, creating is writing. İbrahim Hakkı interprets the verse "By the letter N!¹⁷ And by the Pen and that which they write (therewith)!"¹⁸ as follows: "The angels write the concrete objects of the World of Objects and the abstract objects of the World of Heavenly Kingdom."¹⁹ God used the divine breath to create the world. The breath is also used to produce speech.

Every creature is a letter in this book. The universe has twenty-nine layers, and each layer represents a letter. Natural things produce meaning in much the same way as the letters, which do so due to the relationship with they have with each other and combinations among themselves. The solitary (*mufrad*) letters and meanings become complex (*murakkab*) through these combinations.

We have to remember what the word 'text' meant during the time of İbrahim Hakkı. Briefly put, Ottomans regarded the text as a multiple network of shifting relations. The text is both one and many. They saw the text as being interactively constructed by relations within and between two levels: the utterances (*lafz*) and meaning (*ma'nā*). The level of utterances is constituted by visible and non-visible (*muqaddar*, assumed) elements. Causal relations characterize it. The second layer which constituted the text, the layer of meaning, has itself many layers, and is characterized by non-causal or interpretive (hermeneutic) relations. The methods used to analyze the level of utterances included the causal explanation (*'illiyya*) provided by Syntax (*naĥw*) while the level of meaning is studied by interpretive methods provided by Rhetorical Sciences (*'ilm al-balāġa*).²⁰

16 See Semih Ceyhan, *Abdullah Salahi Uşşaki'nin Vücut risaleleri*, unpublished master thesis, Marmara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 1998.

17 The letter 'N' ("nun") in Arabic has the shape of an ink pot, and it is probable that this is the meaning it symbolically indicates here.

18 "Nun! Wa-l-qalam wa-mā yaşturün!", *The Qur'ān*, Surah al-Qalam, 68/1–2.

19 İbrahim Hakkı, *Marifetname*, Matbaa-i Ahmed Kamil, Istanbul 1330 AH/1911–12 CE, p. 221.

20 For further details, please see my paper "Toward Open Science and Society: Multiplex Relations in Language, Religion and Society – Revisiting Ottoman Culture", in: *Turkish Journal for Islamic Research*, ISAM, 2001. For an earlier work see "Towards an Open Science: Causality and Beyond – Learning from Ottoman Experience", in: *The Humanities on the Birth of the Third Millennium*, Fatih University and Binghamton University, New York, forthcoming.

God, the author of the book of nature, has charged it with the meaning He intended to convey to humanity. The task of the readers, that is humans, consists in describing nature but not ascribing a meaning to it. In other words, the meaning of the universe is found but not founded, discovered but not attributed to it. The book already carries the meaning with it, something initially intended by the author. However, a sign carries multiple meanings: The educational level of the reader is important when understanding the meaning that can be derived from the signs.

The theory of meaning must be briefly taken into consideration here. ‘Meaning’ has two layers that are not mutually exclusive: the apparent (*zāhir*) and the latent (*bāṭin*). There is also the “meaning of the meaning”, as Abdulqāhir al-Ġurġānī argued, because sometimes a meaning is used as an object to indicate yet another meaning.

The imagery of text is applied for both nature and humans. In a similar way to the text, the world is also both one and many. The existence is like a *string*. The stronger it is pulled, the more layers become observable. This is true for the text, external and human nature.

İbrahim Hakki is after *symmetries* among different domains, each of which has layers. The domains include God, humanity, the external world and text. God is the author of everything. He made things in such a way that their basic structure is symmetrical or, put less strongly, mirror each other. Each domain belongs to a different level of existence: The external world exists in the objects (*wuġūd fī l-ayān*), human society exists in the minds (*wuġūd fī l-aḍḥān*), the text exists in writing (*wuġūd fī l-kitāba*), and speech exists in the utterances (*wuġūd fī l-alfāz*).

Studying nature has long been an issue in Islamic theology and law. It was a part of philosophy during the Middle Ages, at which time the debate centered on the question as to whether philosophy was accepted by Muslims. Al-Ġazālī (505/1111) developed a balanced view between opposing perspectives on rational philosophy. His main objection was against metaphysics because he argued that philosophers could not rationally know how the world works. Consequently, in al-Ġazālī’s view philosophers need to rely on revelation when studying metaphysics. In addition, al-Ġazālī argued that theories about nature should be judged on their own merit and by way of rational and empirical analysis, as he regarded nature as not being a religious issue.²¹ Later, orthodox scholars also followed al-Ġazālī as to this issue. Kātib Çelebī (1067/1657), al-Birġiwī (981/1573)

21 For his views on these issues see two of his most relevant books, al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid Muhammad (d. 505/1111), *The Incoherence of the Philosophers: A parallel English-Arabic text translated, introduced and annotated by Michael E. Marmura; editor-in-chief Parviz Morewedge*) Brigham Young University Press, Provo 1997; and also al-Ġazālī, Abū Hāmid Muḥammad (d. 505/1111), *al-Munqid min al-ḍalāl*, Mu’assasat al-Kutub al-ṭāqāfiyya, Beirut 1987.

and his commentators such as Muḥammad al-Ḥādīmī (1176/1762) and Abdulḡanī al-Nablūsī (1143/1731) and Taškubrizāda (968/1561) were of the same opinion. Birgiwī stated, “The part of natural sciences (*tabīyyāt*) which contradicts religion is that which is derived from metaphysics, the status of which you already know, and the part which does not contradict religion is not refused.”²² Birgiwī advocates the orthodox view of the theologians. This held that the belief in the causal relationship between the movement of stars and natural events contradicts religion.

Yet, unlike some of his orthodox predecessors, İbrahim Hakkı argues that even it was accepted that the power of stars influences natural events, this would not contradict Islamic faith, because God is the one who bestowed such a power on them. İbrahim Hakkı also believed that the same is true about the causation attributed to the “nature” (*tab’* or *ṭab’iyāt*) of things which is considered against Islamic faith by theologians. İbrahim Hakkı argues that “nature” receives such a power from God. As long as one accepts that God gave nature such powers to influence events, the causal relationship between the nature of a creature and an event does not contradict religion and religious teaching.

İbrahim Hakkı explains this conflict by making use of an analogy of two ants on a sheet of paper. The two ants watch someone writing on the paper. One claims that writing does not occur by itself, and that the pen is the agent. The other ant, which observes the event of writing on the paper at a distance, objects and claims that the fingers command the pen, and that they are the cause of the writing.

By putting different theories on nature at a perspective in this fashion, İbrahim Hakkı thus finds a peaceful solution to the conflict between theologians and *munāğğimūn* (astronomers and astrologists). At that time, astrology was not completely separated from astronomy in the Islamic world. He also uses the famous example of blind people describing an elephant. Blind people make erroneous statements about the elephant because they generalize their limited knowledge to the whole.²³ Each explanation is true but only at the level at which it operates.²⁴

22 One of the most popular Ottoman scholars, Zainuddīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Muhyiddīn al-Birgiwī (929–981 AH), *aṭ-Ṭarīqa al-Muḥammadiyya wa as-Sira al-Aḥmadiyya*, al-Ḥalabī, Cairo 1379/1960, p. 28. For the view of his commentators see Abū Şa‘īd al-Ḥādīmī, *Bariqa Maḥmūdiyya fī şarḥ tariqat-i muḥammadiyya wa-ş- ş arī‘a an-nabawiyya*, Matba‘at Dār al-Ḥilāfatu l-‘Āliya, Istanbul 1326 H., I, p. 336. Ḥādīmī states that what is considered as contradictory to religion is the claim that some of the natural beings (*ṭabāyi*) have an impact on other things. According to the orthodox theology, the changes in nature are a work of God but not the stars. See also Abdulḡanī al-Nablūsī, *Kitāb al-ḥadiqa al-nādiyya şarḥ al-tariqa al-muḥammadiyya*, Matbaa-ı Amire, Istanbul 1290, I, pp. 335–340.

23 İbrahim Hakkı, *Marifetname*, p. 85.

24 This reminds the author of two principles commonly applied in Ottoman humanities. One is “Kelamın i‘mālî ihmâlinde evladır”. The principle states that it is preferable to activate or

İbrahim Hakkı sees nature as a compassionate mother and writes, “This world is educating us like a compassionate mother.”²⁵ He takes this further and describes nature as a womb for humanity. İbrahim Hakkı adds, “We are still in the womb of a mother.”²⁶ When looked at from this perspective, death can be seen as the real birth, as it results in entry into the eternal world.

For İbrahim Hakkı, nature is a rose garden in which humanity enjoys beauty. In the introduction to *Marifetname*, the same author uses the image of a “rose garden” in which the scent belongs to humans, for nature as a whole.²⁷ The demise of humanity leaves the world without scent.

However, nature (*tab*) can turn into a prison for human beings. Occasionally, İbrahim Hakkı uses the image of cage for nature (*siğğ'in-i tab*).²⁸ People can be liberated from nature by acquiring good qualities (*şifat-ı kemal*). In this context, he writes, “the cage of nature is the example of Hellfire.”²⁹

The first three images of nature reflect God’s providence over the external nature. Human beings should live in harmony with nature. However, the relationship between human beings and their animal nature is characterized by conflict. One should note that the first three images refer to nature and the natural world while the last (the cage of nature) is more about humans themselves. In the latter image, humans must fight against their nature and ascend it. In the first three images, nature is seen in a positive light whereas it is seen in a negative light in the final image.

4. Semiotics of nature in Said Nursi’s thinking

One can find striking similarities between the concept of nature in İbrahim Hakkı’s work and in that of Said Nursi. Both of them studied in the traditional seminaries in the town of Tillo, now located in the North East of Turkey. They both inherited a similar concept of nature and science. İbrahim Hakkı, an Ot-

make use of a word, if possible, instead of ignoring or refusing it. The second is “Kelimada asl olan, mahmili sahihine haml etmektir”. This principle suggests that, as a rule, in discourse speech should be attributed to the correct subject, and should not be generalized in an arbitrary fashion. Due to their crucial place in Ottoman culture, these principles eventually became the general rules of *fiqh* – these are cited in the introductory chapter of *Mecelle*, see Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, *Açıklamalı Mecelle: Mecelle-i ahkam-ı adliye*, ed. Ali Himmet Berki, Hikmet Yayınları, İstanbul 1982, pp. 1–20. These principles can be seen as important strategies for reducing intellectual and thus social conflict, as they grant different possible voices a place in discourse, instead of refusing to hear these voices and therefore suppressing them.

25 İbrahim Hakkı, *Marifetname*, p. 163.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 1.

28 Ibid., p. 500.

29 Ibid., p. 222.

toman thinker and scholar, lived earlier than Said Nursi. The clash with the modern positivist science and its concept of nature is as a result less evident than in the works of Said Nursi. In fact, Said Nursi's intellectual biography reflects the features of a transitional figure from the Ottoman state to modern secularist Turkey. Said Nursi's approach to his life mission shifted throughout this period and increasingly focused on issues raised by the conflict between faith and science.

It is obvious why Said Nursi could not accept the concept of nature adopted by positivist science. He sees that nature is composed of many objects, each of which has a particular type of intelligence peculiar to them, and that these objects speak for their Creator through signification, something which I call 'Semiotics of Nature'. He repeatedly reminds his readers that the world is called *'ālam*, which literally means a sign for its Creator. This view of a living and speaking nature, shared by Nursi and other Muslim thinkers of that time, was challenged by the new positivist concept of nature which was officially adopted by the Turkish educational institutions as part of modernization and westernization in science at the turn of the last century.

Another large difference exists between the traditional Islamic and the positivist understanding of nature. Nursi's semiotics of nature has multiple layers and is similar to that of İbrahim Hakki: There are several levels of analysis and interpretation. Every small object in nature is a world in itself.³⁰ For Nursi, the world as a whole at the macro level and the small objects at the micro level are signs of God. In other words, for Nursi, the macrocosmos and the microcosmos stand for their Creator. This view is similar to that held by İbrahim Hakki and other Muslim thinkers and scholars. This 'multiplexity' in the concept of nature allows scholars to continue to study causes and meanings simultaneously, whilst at the same time working at different levels.

Consequently, for Nursi, the world is a network of causal relations but at the same time a book containing endless small books, sentences, words and letters, which produce a network and meta-network of meanings together. From his perspective, the world is a book consisting of words but each word contains many books in it. A tree is a word and a fruit is a letter, whilst at the same time a seed can be interpreted as a letter containing the program of a complete tree.

God is not part of nature because He is its Creator, and there is in addition a semiotic relationship between the created world and the Creator: The creature is the sign of the Creator. Not only the existence of the Creator, but also, in the view of Nursi and that of many other Muslim thinkers, the divine attributes are manifested in nature. When looked at from this perspective, natural events should be interpreted as the unveiling of God's attributes through His actions,

30 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Işārāt al-i'ğāz*, Istanbul 1959, p. 18.

which usually take place within the framework of causality. However, God's power is not limited to the realm of causality and to natural laws, something reflected in the miracles God gave to Prophets.³¹

For Nursi, the "witnesses" (*ahl aš-šuhūd*) observe God's signs in the world. They see God behind every living thing. In other words, the group of people Nursi labels "the witnesses" reflects constant awareness about semiotic functions of nature. However, these are a highly educated and pious people, who are strong believers in God. Therefore, ordinary people, including common Muslims, who do not have trained eyes and minds, may not possess such a high level of awareness about semiotics of nature.

Nursi's concept of nature also differs from that of naturalists and modern positivists. For him, nature is not a self-running machine and is instead operated by God. However, in the Middle Ages Muslim philosophers and scientists vigorously disputed the relationship between God and nature. According to Muslim philosophers like Avicenna and al-Fārābī, Nursi explains, God bestowed upon objects their 'nature' through the medium with which the very same objects influence other objects and serve as causes of natural phenomena. From this perspective, God is the one who gave things their nature, as He is their Creator. However, this view was not acceptable to al-Ġazālī, who argued that each causal relationship is created by God. From this angle, God is constantly active in nature and every natural phenomenon is His manifestation. In any case, both perspectives regard God as being the *prima causa*, i. e. the cause of causes. Nursi does not explicitly take a side in this debate although, given his education, it is more probable that he would have adopted the view of al-Ġazālī. However, he openly opposes the materialist and positivist concept of nature as a self-operating system which does not receive any directions from God. For Nursi, a Muslim cannot accept that natural phenomena are caused by nature because nature is not a rational actor and is unable to decide what to do. Nursi believes that Nature is created by God and that all sections of the natural world are a result of His will.

Nursi does not reject the materialist concept of nature commonly adopted by modern positivist science because he is against science or does not agree with the causal explanation of natural phenomena. He does not agree with views rejecting God as the ultimate or the *prima causa*. This is obviously a metaphysical discussion which does not have any practical implications on the way scientific research is conducted.

Another major difference exists between Nursi's concept of nature and the one used by modern positivist science which is more relevant for our discussion:

31 This is another major difference between the traditional Islamic and positivist approaches to nature. While for positivists, natural laws are permanent and unchangeable, Muslim scholars believe that God's power is not bound by the laws He himself gave nature.

While Nursi sees nature as a book, the author of which is God, modern positivist sciences considers it to be void of meaning and as consisting entirely of causal relations. The positivist view of nature is completely opposed to the Islamic view of nature as a book.

Here we can easily conclude that Nursi has inherited from Islamic tradition the multiple concept of nature which regards causality and meaning as constituting two interconnected layers of nature. Therefore the two layers, causality and meaning, constitute two inseparable layers of analysis and research which complement each other.

There is yet another striking dimension to the semiotics of nature in Nursi's understanding. The Qur'ān and nature are interlocked: They are mirrors of each other. The Qur'ān is an eternal translation of the book of nature. Nursi establishes many parallelisms between the Qur'ān and the book of nature. Nevertheless, for Nursi, primacy belongs to the book of nature.³²

The positivist approach to science strictly separated causal analysis from studying the meaning of nature and exclusively focused on the former, based on the conviction that the two are incompatible. This was completely new for Nursi and other Muslim thinkers of that time. Consequently, they had to devise an intelligent strategy of resistance to the positivist view of nature without rejecting causal explanations to which the positivist view of the world arrived. They tried to demonstrate that causal explanations afforded by modern science do not logically require a materialist view of nature. Instead, they believed that modern scientific discoveries demonstrated God's greatness and the depth of the meaning contained in nature.

While positivists tried to introduce a materialist concept of nature that is void of meaning, the Turkish academia and youth living during Nursi's lifetime thought that the main aim of Nursi's project was to resist to this trend by recharging nature with meaning. He argued that analyses of causality and meaning should be carried out together, in the same way as it had been done throughout Islamic history. This view contradicted the positivist understanding of science and nature which were officially adopted by the newly established Turkish Republic.³³

32 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Sözler*, Sözleryayınevi, İstanbul 1990, p. 339; Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *İşārāt al-iğāz*, p. 98.

33 For a more detailed discussion on this issue, see: Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: the Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, Albany/NY 1989.

Conclusion

The advocates of what is commonly called modern science constructs a conflicting relationship between external nature and humanity: It preaches that nature should be overcome and controlled by human rationality. Modern science presents controlling the powers of nature as a challenge for human intelligence. From this perspective, nature is an enemy, and not a compassionate mother.

However, the demands of humankind are usually seen positively, and instead of being made subject to subjugation and control, they are unleashed and satisfied. For modern science, humankind sets the norms; it is the paradise, and not the cage from which people should be liberated. "The nature or essence of man was now identified *tout court* with the possession of reason, and natural law was held to be whatever is found acceptable by *recta ratio* or *santa ratio*."³⁴

In addition, from the perspective of modern ontology, there is nowhere to ascend above and descend beyond physical nature. Modern ontology conflates the spiritual and the physical level instead of viewing them as two separate levels. This view not only completely excludes any effort to study the meaning of nature but also makes it ontologically impossible.

In contrast, as the examples of Erzurumlu İbrahim Hakkı and Said Nursi demonstrate, causes and meaning can be studied simultaneously without hindering one another by adopting a more flexible, multi-polar concept of nature. The current materialist view of nature should therefore be replaced with a multiplex one to enable the possibility to charge nature with meaning and, through the medium of it, establish new environmental ethics based on a meaningful relationship with it.

Literature

- Barthes, Ronald, *Semiotic Challenge*, tr. Richard Howard, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994.
- al-Birgıwı, Zeynuddın Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. 'Alı Muḥyiddın, *al-Ṭarīqa al-Muḥammadiyya wa-s-sıra al-aḥmadiyya*, Cairo 1379/1960.
- Bohas, G./Guillaume, J.-P./Kouloughli, D. E., *The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*, Routledge, New York 1990.
- Çağırıcı, Mustafa, "İbrahim Hakkı Erzurumî", in: TDV *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 21, pp. 309-311.
- Campbell, Joseph, *The Masks of God*, I-IV, Souvenir Press, London 1969.
- Ceyhan, Semih, *Abdullah Salahi Uşşaki'nin Vücut risaleleri*, unpublished master thesis, Marmara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 1998.

34 "Natural Law", in: Paul Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York 1972, p. 542.

- Abū ‘Abdul‘azīz Šāḥ Waliyyullāh Aḥmad b. ‘Abdurrahīm ad-Diḥlāwī, *Ḥuḡḡatullāh al-bālīḡa*, ed. Muḥammad Šarīf Suqqar, Dār Iḥyā’ al-‘Ulūm, Beirut 1990.
- Eliade, Mircea, *A History of Religious Ideas*, I-III, tr. Willard R. Trask, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1978.
- Gallie, W. B., *Pierce and Pragmatism*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1952.
- İbrahim Hakki, *Marifetname*, Matbaa-i Ahmed Kamil, Istanbul 1330 AH/1911–1912 AD.
- Hodge, Robert/Kress, Gunther, *Social Semiotics*, Polity Press, Oxford 1988.
- Hoopes, James (ed.), *Pierce on Signs*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1991.
- al-İḥādīmī, Abu Ša‘īd, *Bariqa mahmūdiyya fi šarḥ tariqat-i muḥammadiyya wa š-šarī‘a an-nabawiyya*, Vol. I, Maṭba‘at Dār al-Ḥilāfatu l-‘Āliya, Istanbul 1326 H.
- Mardin, Şerif, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: the Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, State University of New York, Albany/NY 1989.
- al-Nāblusī, ‘Abdulḡanī, *Kitāb al-ḡadīqa al-nādiyya šarḥ al-tariqa al-muḥammadiyya*, Vol. I, Matbaa-ı Amire, Istanbul 1290.
- “Natural Law”, in: Edwards, Paul (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Macmillan, New York 1972.
- Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Isharat al-İjaz*, Istanbul 1959.
- Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Sözler*, Sözler Yayınevi, Istanbul 1990.
- Sai, Mustafa Çelebi, *Yapılar Kitabı: Tezkiretü'l-Bünyan ve Tezkiretü'l-Ebniye: Mimar Sinan'ın Anıları*, ed. Hayatı Develi and Samih Rifat, Koçbank, İstanbul 2002.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics*, tr. Roy Harris, Open Court, La Salle/Illinois 1994.
- Şentürk, Recep, “Toward Open Science and Society: Multiplex Relations in Language, Religion and Society – Revisiting Ottoman Culture”, in: *Turkish Journal for Islamic Research*, ISAM, 2001.
- Şentürk, Recep, “Towards an Open Science: Causality and Beyond – Learning from Ottoman Experience”, in: *The Humanities on the Birth of the Third Millennium*, Fatih University and Binghamton University, New York, forthcoming.
- Versteegh, Kees, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought*, III, Routledge, New York 1997.
- White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1987.