

Nature: Its Moral and Metaphysical Dimensions

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to bring into light the metaphysical and moral dimensions of nature. The lessons of moral and metaphysical significance that one can find out in nature will be discussed at some length. The Muslim thinkers tell us about three major sources of wisdom; (i) Reflection on our Own Self, (ii) Reflection upon Nature that surrounds us, and (iii) Reflection on the pages of History. These three sources are supposed to transport us beyond ourselves and serve as pointers to the ultimate Being and Reality. Nature can transform man's life into a purposeful activity that will provide a real meaning to his life, life that is above the level of dead matter, which occupies a lower position in the scale of evolution. For that purpose a sincere quest on the part of man is needed. In order to express and elaborate the vital role, which nature can play in shaking and shocking the human consciousness towards Ultimate Reality, a rational and unbiased approach has been adopted in this paper.

Keywords: Nature; Metaphysics; Morals.

Introduction

As a rule two paradigms are advanced to explain the phenomena of life and the universe, that is;

- a) Everything comes from God and unto God it returns.
- b) Everything comes from matter and unto matter it returns.

The first paradigm is based upon the “remembrance and presence” of God, which gives meaning and purpose to life and universe. Here God operates by a law of Mercy that He has imposed upon Himself. Our creation, preservation, guidance and judgment all are supervised by his law of Mercy. This approach integrates and cements human personality. It gives strength and vitality and results in the activeness of life.

On the other hand, the second paradigm is based upon chance and determinism. Nature according to this approach is the ultimate existence and operates by its own laws. In order to explain

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the phenomena of nature, there is no need to claim and accept the existence of a great being like God. By accepting this position, one is deprived of the purpose and meaning of life. It results in the disintegration and destruction of human personality. An acceptance or rejection of anyone position among the above two paradigms is determined by the correct or incorrect understanding of nature.

Mohammad Zia Ullah writes in his book, *Islamic Concept of God*,
*“The basic values of modern civilization are purely materialistic; its widespread evil influence permeates everywhere. As a result, all religious truths are denied and religion is held in ridicule”.*¹

For a man of wisdom, the first paradigm is of great worth and value, and for a person whose moral and spiritual vision is corrupted and depraved due to the materialistic tendencies of life and nature, the second paradigm is more appealing. Now we will try to discuss the moral and metaphysical lessons that one can find in nature by speculating and deeply penetrating into it.

Metaphysical aspects of Nature

Fazlur Rahman writes in *Major Themes of the Quran*,

*“For the Quran, the whole of nature is one firm, well-knit structure with no gaps, no ruptures and no dislocations. It works by its own laws, which have been ingrained in it by God, and is therefore autonomous, but is not autocratic, for, in itself, it has no warrant for its own existence and it cannot explain itself”.*²

This shows that although nature enjoys its autonomous position, yet it is a contingent being, hence depends upon another necessary being, i.e. God for explaining its creation, preservation and existence. The contingency and finitude of nature necessitate the existence of another being upon which it is contingent.

Whenever we think about nature, certain fundamental questions arise in our mind like, what is its origin and ultimate nature, how and from where does it get its being and existence, is it finite or infinite, is it eternal or temporal?, and many more as well. If these questions are properly dealt with, the answers that we find will help us to reach towards a conclusion related to the first paradigm, i.e. nature will help us in ‘finding God’, hence we will be in a position to give a meaningful and purposive explanation of the universe.

God says in the Holy Quran, “And in the earth are signs for those who have certainty of faith. And also in your own selves.

Will you not then see?³ This Quranic verse is an open invitation to its readers for thinking about the natural manifestations and to make observations of nature, which will lead them towards a certainty of faith about God. Fazlur Rahman says,

*“According to the Quran, once you think of the whence (and the whither) of nature, you must ‘find God’. This is not a ‘proof’ of God’s existence, for in the thought of the Quran, if you cannot ‘find God’ you will never ‘prove’ Him.”*⁴

The holy Quran reminds us thus, “The only straight path leads to God- all other paths are deviant”.⁵ The path that leads refers towards the discovery of God rather than proving the existence of God on rational grounds. Nature cannot help us to prove the existence of God on rational grounds, because God as an infinite being has a transcendental nature, which is beyond the limitations of human reason and senses. Yet nature can help us to find and discover God. Mark Stoll quotes Anne Bradstreet, a woman poet!

*“That there is a God my reason would soon tell me by the won drow’s works that I see, the vast frame of ye Heaven + ye Earth, the order of all things night and day, summer and winter, spring and Autvmne, the dayly providing for this great hovshold Vpon ye earth, ye preserving + directing of all to its proper end...Mark Stoll says that “Neither learning, nor Bible, nor sermons had brought her back to faith; Anne Bradstreet had found God in nature.”*⁶

Allama Iqbal while confessing about the influence of Hegel, Goethe, Ghalib, Bedil and Wordsworth upon his thought records, “Wordsworth’s naturalism saved me from an outright atheism in my early youth, i.e. student days.”⁷

So for a man of insight, nature possesses deep moral and metaphysical lessons in itself. One can discover and find the existence of God by looking at nature but with an unbiased attitude, mind and vision. A feeling-full, appreciative and sensitive heart is needed in that regard rather than dry reason. The manifestations of nature possess metaphysical and moral aspects, but nature will reveal these aspects only upon a person with sound spiritual vision and sensitive, appreciative and feeling-full heart. Only a true lover can understand, what role nature can play? as Iqbal rightly said, “The beauties of nature can be realized only through the eyes of a lover.”⁸

Allama Iqbal, while criticizing the negative implications of Greek philosophy, upon Muslim thinkers, in obscuring their vision of the Quran writes to present an important theme of the Quran,

“Quran, which sees in the humble bee a recipient of Divine inspiration and constantly calls upon the reader to observe the perpetual change of the winds, the alteration of day and night, the clouds, the starry heavens, and the planets swimming through infinite space.”⁹

This again, points out towards a kind of a scientific attitude of the Quran, which gives importance to observation of nature, but with the ultimate goal of discovering metaphysical realities and seeking moral lessons from it. Iqbal again while telling us about the importance of nature writes, “All the wonderful booklore in your library is not worth one glorious sunset on the banks of the Ravi.”¹⁰

Every micro and macro being of nature has a deep lesson in itself. It is up to man to make deep observations of it and then use his insight and intellect for making right judgments. The Quran time and again invites man to natural phenomena and tries to awake a metaphysical and moral awareness in him in order to make him God-conscious being. The physical world points towards its Creator. Though that Being cannot be proved rationally, but man of wisdom can discover and find Him by going beyond the extrinsic appearances of nature.

Some great Muslim philosophers tell us about three important sources of knowledge;

- (i) Eye of the Mind; (Intellect/Reason)
- (ii) Eye of the Flesh; (Sense Experience)
- (iii) Eye of the Heart; (Agency for Moral Guidance)

All these sources play an important role but it is the last one which is of vital importance, and leads an individual towards realities that exist beyond natural phenomena. It is the Qalb i.e. Heart of an individual that can help him to find real meaning in the universe. Reason and senses can help us to understand the natural world while an appreciative heart can help us to find and understand the metaphysical and moral dimensions of nature.

Iqbal while talking about the universe as a spiritual reality writes,

“The world, in all its details, from the mechanical movement of what we call the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in the human ego, is the self-revelation of the ‘Great I am’.”¹¹

Dr. Nazir Qaiser, while giving Iqbal’s views about the universe records, “It (the universe) is spiritual, also, in this sense that it leads to the belief of God”.¹²

While discussing natural causation, Fazlur Rahman explains,

*“Since nature is well-knit and working with the laws that have been made inherent in it, there is undoubtedly ‘natural causation’, as recognized by the Quran. But this does not mean that God creates nature and then goes to sleep; nor, of course, does this mean that God and nature or God and the human will are ‘rivals’ and function at the expense of each other; nor yet does it mean that God operates in addition to the operations of man and nature. Without God’s activity, the activity of nature and man becomes delinquent, purposeless and self-wasting”.*¹³

The natural causation cannot work by its own mechanical laws alone; these laws are made innate in it by God. The consistency, order, rhythm and coherency of nature denote that God has created it and is actively participating in it through His ability and power to create, sustain and preserve nature and all that exist in it, animate or inanimate. Dr. Nazir Qaiser quotes a beautiful verse of Iqbal’s Urdu poetry, which expresses God’s creation of the universe and His active participation in it in these words, “This creation is perhaps still unfinished. For every moment arises the cry ‘Be’, and it becomes.”¹⁴

So the universe being a continuous progressive process of creativity and becoming, justifies God, to be the meaning of reality that is clarified, manifested and brought home by the universe.

The Quran does not agree with the atheists who consider the universe to be a product of chance and also reject the claims of those who believe that God has created the universe in sport. The existing universe points toward the existence of God, Who is responsible for its order and perfect working. Many think that all parts of the universe are working interdependently; hence there is no need to believe in the existence of God as a necessary Being for explaining the existence of the universe. Yet, the parts of any organism may support each other but the organism as a whole fails to explain itself. Hence, nature in order to explain itself points towards the existence of a super Being, God.

While explaining the concepts of ‘qadar’, which means ‘measuring’ and ‘amr’, which means ‘command’, Fazlur Rahman writes,

*“The laws of nature express the command of God. But nature does not and cannot disobey God’s commands and cannot violate natural laws. Hence the entirety of nature is called Muslim by the Quran, for it surrenders itself to and obeys the command of God”.*¹⁵

Quran reveals the seven heavens and the earth and whatever is there sings the glories of God.¹⁶

This shows that the entire nature is governed by natural laws but that nature along with its laws points towards something beyond itself. Natural causation points towards Divine causation, but both natural and Divine causation are not two duplicate, disparate or different causalities but are in fact the same. Thus clouds and winds cause rains but in reality God brings them in order to sustain the earth.

Nature and natural phenomena has a utility to serve man. Nature is for man, while man is for God. Man, in order to serve as a servant of God, needs nature to take inspirations from it. What is present in nature, affirms what is revealed in the Holy Books, whose basic purpose is to remind man, time and again to be loyal to his Creator, and act and behave as a servant of God. Nature along with all its potentialities is finite and that finitude of nature necessitates the existence of an infinite Being, Who places potentialities in the finite natural universe. Fazlur Rahman writes, "The Quran speaks frequently of the perfect order in the universe as proof not only of God's existence but also of His Unity."¹⁷

Whenever we observe the nature, we find out a purpose and consistent order in it, this order in the nature implies a Being i.e. God, Who brings and sustains this order in nature due to His will and sheer power. The regularity and order in the nature proves it to be the prime miracle of God. This gigantic and vast universe can be created only by a powerful Being God. The Quran says,

*"And you see the mountains and think them solid (and stationary) but they are fleeting like clouds- the creation of God Who has well-completed the creation of everything."*¹⁸

Fazlur Rahman says again,

*"This gigantic machine, the universe with all its causal processes, is the prime 'sign' (aya) or proof of its Maker. Who else but an infinitely powerful, merciful and purposeful Being could have brought into existence something with dimensions so vast and an order and design so complex and minute? Yet man, the Quran complains recurrently, is ordinarily apt to 'forget' God so long as 'natural causes' work for him; it is only when natural causes fail him that he 'discovers' God."*¹⁹

Nature is a natural sign of the unique infinite Being. Beside it (nature), God brings portent or historical signs like floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, torrential rains etc. by suppressing, diverting or temporarily suspending the efficacy of natural causes

when people are sinful as discussed by Fazlur Rahman. Working of nature, different phenomena like sea and land, human mind in itself, all natural phenomena are considered as genuine signs of God. Quran says,

“Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the succession of day and night are signs for people of wisdom—those who remember {or mention, i.e. by reciting the Quran} standing and sitting and laying on their sides, and who ponder over the creation of the heavens and the earth [exclaiming]: our Lord, You have not created all this in vain.”²⁰

The entire creation itself is a sign of its Creator; it cannot explain its own creation by itself, hence points towards God, Who is the reason behind its existence. The order, complexity and regularity of nature cannot be brought about into existence by itself. Allama Iqbal records in his book, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*,

“No doubt, the immediate purpose of the Quran in this reflective observation of nature is to awaken in man the consciousness of that which nature is regarded a symbol.”²¹

The Quran reveals,

“Can they not look up to the clouds how they are created; and to the heaven how it is upraised; and the mountains how they are rooted and the earth how it is outspread?”²²

This empirical invitation of the Quran is to make man feel that nature is not the outcome of dark and uncontrolled forces. It moves towards the realization of a higher and nobler goal. The apprehension and realization of that goal can transform human life into an activity of purpose and meaning. Nature always offers that opportunity to man, that helps him to make the realization of those higher and nobler values of life. God’s creation of things necessitate man to assign values and meanings to them, as Iqbal tells us,

“God created things; man created the worth of things. The immortality of a people depends upon their incessant creation of ‘worths’, said Nietzsche. Things certainly bear the stamp of Divine manufacture; but their meaning is through and through human.”²³

Hence it is up to man to find, what is valuable and meaningful in nature.

Moral aspects of Nature

Man has to take aspirations from the universe in order to give real meaning to his personal as well as collective life. Iqbal tells us,

*“It is the lot of man to share in the deeper aspirations of the universe around him and to shape his own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself to its forces, now by putting the whole of his energy to mould its forces to his own ends and purposes.”*²⁴

Man’s adjustment and adaptation with nature, and man’s quest to mould nature in accordance with his own needs, necessitates a true understanding of nature. That real and genuine understanding of nature finally leads man towards the metaphysical and moral lessons ingrained in it.

God measures everything, and everything, including nature and man is under His command. Yet man is different from nature and occupies a unique position as mentioned by Fazlur Rahman,

*“The fundamental difference between man and nature is, that whereas natural command disallows disobedience, commands to man presuppose a choice and free volition on his part. Hence what is natural command in nature becomes moral command in man. This gives man a unique position in the order of creation, at the same time it charges him with a unique responsibility which he can discharge only through Taqwa.”*²⁵

Frank Thilly while discussing Fichte’s philosophy of ego writes,

*“Events in the world of nature and acts of individual selves are the visible expressions of the ultimate moral purpose; we can understand them only as such; they have no reality except as instrumentality of the moral purpose of the universe.”*²⁶

Dr. Nazir Qaiser while making comparison between Fichte and Iqbal writes, “The external world is conducive to moral as well as material and spiritual development.”²⁷

In nature, we have deterministic and mechanistic governance in the form of natural laws, and these laws themselves are run, controlled and governed by God. There is a moral lesson for man in nature; man has to bring a regularity and order of nature in his own personality but with a difference of enjoying free choices. The freedom of will enjoyed by man also puts a burden of responsibility upon his shoulder, as J. P. Sartre says, “You are free but you are responsible, not only for your own self but for your fellow beings as well”. That freedom makes man answerable

before his own conscience, society and God. Fazlur Rahman writes,

*“Since everything in the universe does behave in accordance with its ingrained laws, automatically obeys the ‘command’ of God- man is the only exception to this universal law, for he is the only being endowed with a free choice of obeying or disobeying the command of God. Just as it is ‘written unto’ every other creature, this command is written upon man’s heart.”*²⁸

The command of God, followed by nature, which man of wisdom and insight, can understand by making deep penetration into nature, is basically written upon man’s heart. Man has to search it out in his mental and moral consciousness. Nature possesses deep moral signs in itself, which are helpful to make man realize the Divine moral commands written upon his heart. Heart is the agency which receives moral guidance; heart could be well-guided, corrupted or depraved. Natural manifestations and signs, which the Quran calls as ‘*Aya*’ can awake a moral conscience in an individual, but only with a well-guided heart. Nature follows while man ought to follow, but this position of man gives him a unique risk along with a unique privilege.

Mark Stoll presents human failure to find God in nature in these words, “The decline in interest in religious experience and revelation drained God from the natural world.”²⁹

The empirical knowledge of nature itself will be of little value and benefit if it fails in awakening the inner perception of man about his own potentialities, risks, situation and destiny. Hence nature has its real worth due to its moral dimensions rather than blind forces, where man is free to choose among the alternatives provided by nature.

The apparent gap between God, man and nature is basically an illusion, which man of vision and insight can bridge up easily, but with a constant struggle, and thorough understanding of the world. Dr. Tehsin Firaqi, while presenting his paper on Iqbal, (Man and Universe-Iqbal’s Perception), in an International Symposium, discusses Iqbal’s cosmology in these words,

*“Iqbal’s cosmology admits of no rivalry among Man, God and Universe. Being a spiritual monist, he sees no gulf between the Creator and the created. But unlike the pantheists, his individual, though steeped in the love of God, is so conscious of his unique ego, that instead of losing itself in the Ocean of Ultimate Reality, he tries to absorb the Ocean in a tiny drop; the human self.”*³⁰

So, human self has the ability to lead us towards the ultimate truths of the universe, which definitely are, metaphysical, moral and spiritual. Quran is interested in three types of knowledge for man, i.e. knowledge of nature, history and man himself. Fazlur Rahman says,

*“This knowledge is ‘scientific’ knowledge, based on observation by ‘the eyes and ears’; yet this scientific knowledge has finally to ‘strike the heart’ and to kindle a perception in man which will transform his scientific and technological skills in accordance with the moral perception that will, one hopes, be born in him.”*³¹

So our knowledge and understanding of nature, no matter, how much scientific it will be, is valueless and dangerous, if it violates the moral standards and fails to awake the moral consciousness in us.

The qadar or measuring operates in nature is a type of holistic determinism which means finitude or limited and not predetermination. “This qadar or measure also operates at the holistic level in the sphere of human moral actions, which by definition are free.”³²

People think that the process of nature is based upon self-sufficient causes, without relying upon any other thing than itself, that is why, they rebel against God or ignore His existence. They fail to realize that the universe is a sign that points towards something beyond its own existence (i.e. existence of God). The universe would be and could be nothing along with its own internal causes without that something, that something is God, Who is the metaphysical dimension and moral order of the universe. Realization of such an attitude demands a higher consciousness on the part of an individual, and awakening this higher consciousness is one of the main purposes of the Quran, as Iqbal tells us, “The main purpose of the Quran is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe.”³³ Again, in the words of Iqbal,

*“The naturalism of the Quran is only a recognition of the fact that man is related to nature, and this relation, in view of its possibility as a means of controlling her forces, must be exploited not in the interest of the unrighteous desire for domination, but in the nobler interest of a free upward movement of spiritual life.”*³⁴

Iqbal very rightly points out that our struggle to control nature should not be based upon blind domination of natural phenomena for our selfish emotions and desires, but it should help us in moving upward on the scale of evolution, and should enable us to make moral and spiritual progress in our journey of life.

Conclusion

“Nature and God are not two different factors; God is more of a dimension or meaning than an item among items”. These words of Fazlur Rahman, show that the entire process of nature, along with its innate laws points towards the existence of God. Nature by itself fails to explain its own phenomena. The moral and metaphysical dimensions of nature give meaning to human life. Nature does not operate on the basis of blind and mechanistic forces but depends upon the power, majesty and mercy of God for its operation.

The metaphysical and moral dimensions of nature are based upon eternal ideas, which might take time to be realized, as Rumi said, “The idea which comes first comes last in realization- Particularly that idea which is eternal.”³⁵

But it is sure that man on the basis of his appreciative self as Iqbal calls it, has the ability to discover and understand these eternal truths. The true achievement of human knowledge whether scientific, philosophical, religious etc. lie in understanding these metaphysical and moral dimensions of nature that surrounds man. Man can find and discover these aspects by analyzing and observing nature with a sensitive, appreciative and feeling full heart.

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