



The Term “Nafs” in The Qur’ān

Kur’ân’da Nefs Kavramı

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Abstract

The definition, nature, characteristics, and identification of the *nafs* are among the most fundamental problems in both metaphysics and theology. The manner in which the subject of the *nafs* is addressed even provides the opportunity to scrutinize the entire Islamic thought tradition through this topic. Indeed, it can be observed that the approach to the topic of the *nafs* is foundational to cosmological, ontological, epistemological, and ethical aspects in understanding existence in general and human existence in particular, which indicates that *nafs* has many dimensions rather than one definitive character. According to the prevailing understanding in the literature, *nafs* is emphasized to a) play a significant role in the formation of existence, b) have a nature separate from the body, c) be the rationale for obtaining knowledge, and d) be a source for ethical actions. In this context, the inquiries “where am I and what am I related to”, “what am I”, “what and how can I know” and “what should I do” are directly addressed within the framework of the theory of the *nafs*. The presentation of the fundamental determinant of human existence as a separate and distinct entity from the body is based on certain reasons. Humans’ abilities to operate cognitive processes at a higher level, to generate ethical actions, and to be addressed by revelation has led to the conclusion that humans are different from and superior to other beings. This distinctiveness and superiority, however, imply that existence is not limited to the material. The idea that matter is always associated with qualities such as change, decay, fragmentation, and extinction has nourished this belief. Therefore, especially in the later period of kalām (*muta’ahhürün*), the conception of existence which is material but is not restricted to materiality alone is rejected. In other words, the idea of a being that, while material, can produce non-material outputs has been abandoned, and human beings have been examined behind the duality of *nafs* and body. The preference for a dualistic understanding is not inherent in the formation of kalām. It is observed that in the early periods of kalām (*mutaqaddimün*), Mu’tazili, Ash’ari, and Maturidi literature, collectively, emphasized the need to define human existence without reference to a separate *nafs* from the body. This preference for a dualistic understanding in analyzing human existence is a product of the influence resulting from encounters with different cultures. In this regard, the impact of Greek, Indian, Egyptian, and Sumerian philosophies on Islamic thought is evident. The fundamentally non-dualistic approach of kalām seems to be stemmed from the Qur’ān. In our study, the foundation of this claim will be laid down. The word *nafs* one of the fundamental terms of the Qur’ān, will be examined from a holistic perspective. This examination will also provide a basis for evaluating the literature on this subject.

Keywords: Kalām, The Qur’ān, Human, Nafs, Structural integrity.

Öz

*Nefs*in tanımı, mahiyeti, özellikleri, ilişkili olduğu alanların tespiti hem metafiziğin hem de teolojinin en temel problemlerinden biridir. Öyle ki *nefs* konusunun ele alınış tarzı, İslam düşünce geleneğini topyekûn bu konu üzerinden inceleme imkânı dahi sunmaktadır. Zira varlığı ve özel olarak insanı anlama noktasında, *nefs* konusunun kozmolojik, ontolojik, epistemolojik ve ahlâkî alanların tümünün temelini yerleştirildiği görülmektedir. Bu durum, *nefs* teorisinin kendi içinde bir bütün oluşturacak şekilde değerlendirildiğini göstermektedir. Literatürde hâkim olan anlayışa göre, *nefs*in; a) varlığın oluşumunda önemli bir yer teşkil ettiği, b) bedenden ayrı ve farklı bir mahiyet taşıdığı, c) bilgi elde etmenin gerekçesi olduğu ve d) ahlâkî eylemlere kaynaklık ettiği vurgulanmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, “Neredeyim ve neyle ilişkililiyim?”, “Neyim?”, “Neyi, nasıl bilebilirim?” ve “Ne yapmalıyım?” sorularına *nefs* teorisi bağlamında cevap arandığı söylenebilir. İnsan varlığının temel belirleyenin bedenden ayrı ve farklı bir varlık olarak sunulması, birtakım gerekçelerden hareket etmektedir. Kognitif süreçleri üst düzeyde işletebilmesi, ahlâkî eylem üretebilmesi; ayrıca vahye muhatap kılınması, insanın diğer varlıklardan farklı ve üstün olduğu sonucuna götürmüştür. Bu farklılık ve üstünlük ise insanın maddî olanla sınırlı olamayacağı fikrini beraberinde getirmiştir. Maddenin daima; değişme, bozulma, parçalanma, yok olma gibi niteliklerle ilişkilendirilmesi bu kanaati beslemiştir. Dolayısıyla –özellikle müteahhir dönemde- hem maddî olan hem de maddî olana sıkışmayan bir varlık tasavvuruna yer verilmemiştir. Bir başka ifadeyle, maddî olduğu halde gayri maddî üretimler sağlayabilecek bir varlık fikrinden vazgeçilmiş, insanı *nefs*-beden düalitesi ardında irdeleme tercih edilmiştir. Bu tercih, teolojinin oluşum özünde yer alan bir anlayış değildir. Zira erken dönem Mu’tazilî, Eş’arî ve Mâtürîdî kelâm literatürünün, ortak bir şekilde, insanın bedenden ayrık *nefse* referansta bulunmadan tanımlanması gerektiği üzerinde durduğu görülmektedir. İnsan varlığını çözümleme noktasında düalist anlayışın tercih edilmesi, farklı kültürlerle karşılaşma sonucundaki etkinin bir ürünüdür. Bu doğrultuda Yunan, Hint, Mısır ve Sümer felsefelerinin İslam düşünce geleneği üzerinde etkili olduğu görülmektedir. Özü itibarıyla kelâmın düalist anlayıştan uzak yaklaşımının ise Kur’ân’dan temel aldığı söylenebilir. Çalışmamızda bu iddiamızın temeli kurulacaktır. Kur’ân’ın

temel terimlerimden biri olan *nefs* kelimesi, bütünsel bir bakış açısıyla incelenecektir. Bu inceleme, bu konuda oluşturulmuş literatürün nasıl değerlendirilmesi gerektiğiyle ilgili de zemin oluşturacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kelâm, Kur’ân, İnsan, Nefs, Yapısal bütünlük.

Introduction*

Efforts to conceptualize a Qur’anic term accurately should involve an endeavor to determine the “linguistic”, “ethical”, “social/historical” and “divine” aspects. It is linguistic because revelation is embodied through the possibilities of language and reflects the intellectual background. It is ethical because all actions in the sphere of existence constructed by the will of both the Creator and human beings are ethical in nature, even though their spheres of influence are different, which is the reason why the revelation takes human disposition as a given ground for it. It is social-historical because concepts have their own history which is formed in line with cognitive structure of the culture and leaves its marks on language and thought. It is divine because it corrects misconceived terms created by social mentality and habits. All these are the founding principles of dealing with any Qur’anic term. To isolate any one of these principle from others will result in a reductionist outcome in understanding any Qur’anic term. And it also leads to inconsistency of the conclusion with these principles as the data has not been correctly evaluated, and an incorrect cognitive process has been employed. For example, to reach the root meaning of any Qur’anic term, pre-Islamic poetic works are initially referred (*linguistic*). However, the accuracy and authenticity of these works are not warranted. Even if their authenticity is warranted they are not absolute binding resources as they are mainly cultural. As it is necessary to look at whether the content that culture attributes to term (*social/historical*) is confirmed by revelation (*divine*). Additionally, evaluating pre-Islamic poetry in light of later perspectives developed by philosophical and theological approaches hinders reaching a correct understanding, which is general case. What we need to understand any Qur’anic term is to identify principles that can be abstracted from any kind of particular context and to be able to manage our knowledge process under the light of these principles (*ethical*). Creating content by considering these four principles will also enable the discussion of the term on a universal level. This is because the essential nature of any Qur’anic term encompasses rational, ethical, and existential values. This is a requirement of the nature of revelation. Furthermore, precision in creating content will ensure that the conceptual connection established between the knowing-subject and the known corresponds to a mental reality, not an illusion. A correctly formulated term is “acquired knowledge” and it will serve as a basis for “knowledge to be acquired.”

In this regard, human beings should aim to go beyond the act of existence and achieve the act of understanding. In fact, this is a necessary condition of the structure of human existence. The next cognitive condition required by the structure of human existence is to form thoughts. To establish thoughts is nothing but creating through concepts, through a process of awareness

* Dedicated to the martyred children in Palestine...

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(*homo concipiens et loquens*).¹ This is because forming thoughts requires being conscious, choosing a topic intentionally, and concentrating on the subject with systematic consistency in a detailed manner.²

This article plans to conduct a similar study on the use of the term of “nafs” in the Qur’ān.³ In this context, the aim is to make an original classification based on the areas of use of the term in the Qur’ān.

1. The Term “Nafs” in The Qur’ān

Words derived from the root *n-f-s* are used in the Qur’ān in various forms such as *tanaffasa*, *yatanāfasu*, *mutanāfisūn*, *nufūs*, *nafs* and *anfūs*, totaling 298 instances.⁴ When these usages are analyzed, a comprehensive semantic field emerges, consisting of five complementary categories.

1.1. Nafs in the Sense of Existence Itself

When analyzing the verses containing the word “nafs”, it becomes apparent that it is used to signify the “existence itself” This primary meaning establishes the core significance of the term. The usage of the word to indicate the essence of a being implies the inclusion of all aspects of that being, making “nafs” a word that cannot be restricted to any specific attribute or dimension. The usage in this sense can be classified into three headings:

1.1.1. It is Used for the Essence of Allah

The use in this context⁵ is important for understanding the meaning of the word “nafs.” Being divine logically excludes having a composite nature. This indicates that the term “nafs” used for Allah signifies the Essence of Being, Being itself. In this regard, it can be said that the word

¹ See Betül Çotuksöken, *Kavramlara Felsefe ile Bakmak* (Istanbul: İnsancıl Publications, 1998), 8, 13, 18, 20.

² cf. Abū l-Qāsim Mahmūd ibn ‘Umar ibn Muhammad al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Minhāj fī uşūl ad-dīn* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Publications, 2020), 98.

³ The scope of this text is limited to the usage of the concept of “nafs” in the Qur’ān. It explores how the concept is understood and defined by various scientific disciplines, the methods employed in understanding the concept, the attributes assigned to the self, the justifications for these attributes, whether the concept undergoes any semantic evolution, and what the cosmological, ontological, epistemological, and ethical contexts of the concept entail. It also delves into the sources that contribute to the literature on the subject of the self, the reasons and analysis of the mind-body distinction, the psychological motives behind making the mind-body distinction, and whether the terms “rūh” and “nafs” are synonymous. For detailed information on these topics and for an original categorization of the concept of “nafs” based on early Arabic dictionaries, see Tuğba Günal, *Nefs Fenomenolojisi* (Istanbul: Endülüis Publications, 2022).

Regarding the concept of “nafs”, classifications of meanings have been made in the books *al-Vujūh wa-al-nazā’ir*, commentaries, or independent articles. These classifications will not be included in our work, and there will be no critique or confirmation of them. Instead, a new categorization of the concept of “nafs” will be established based on its usage in the Qur’ān. This approach is taken because it has been observed that in these studies, the meaning of the concept is attributed in line with theological, philosophical, or Sufi literature, which poses an obstacle to determining its true meaning. For a detailed analysis of the subject based on sources, see Günal, *Nefs Fenomenolojisi*.

⁴ Muhammad Fuād Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu’jam al-mufahras li-alfāz al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 1408), 881-885.

⁵ See Āl ‘Imrān 3/28, 30; al-Mā’ide 5/116; al-An’ām 6/12, 54; Tâ Hâ 20/41.

“nafs”, used for Allah and expressing His essence, is synonymous with the words *vajh*⁶ and, when singular, *ism*⁷ in the Qur’ān.

The usage of “I have chosen/formed you for Myself (*wa’ṣṭana tuka li-nafsī*)” in Surah Tāhā, verse 41, although containing an emphasis and exaggeration similar to expressions like “I built this house for Myself,” “I constructed it for Myself,”⁸ can also be interpreted as a representation of Allah’s conversation with Moses,⁹ emphasizing that the selection of messengers and the sending of revelation belong to Allah, and that the messengers are chosen to convey His commands and prohibitions.¹⁰

In Surah al-Mā’idah, verse 116, regarding the words *ta’lamu mā fi nafsi wa-lā a’lamu mā fi nafsika*, two interpretations are possible for the term “nafs”: a) Interpreting it to convey the meaning of “ma’lūm”, giving the sense of “You know what is within me, but I do not know what is within You.” This emphasizes the impossibility of attaining knowledge of the divine.¹¹ b) Relating it to the part mentioning the The Messenger of Allah Isa and interpreting it as “what I have done and what I will do (*mā kāna minnī wa-mā yekūnu*)” in comparison to him, while giving the meaning of “ḡayb” in the context of Allah.¹² The end of the verse, stating “Innaka anta ‘allāmu l-ḡuyūb”, supports the interpretation of the term “ḡayb”. However, the usage of the term “nafs” in reference to the essence requires interpreting the verse as “You know what is within me, but I do not know what is within You.”

In other contexts where the term “nafs” is used for Allah, it is emphasized that the foundational principle determining the relationship between Allah and humans is mercy (*kataba ... ‘alā nafsīhi r-rahmah*),¹³ and this fundamental law of mercy (*kataba ... rahmah*) is determined by Allah Himself (*nafs*). This law of mercy, operating from Allah to humans, also entails certain requirements from humans toward Allah. From what we understand from the Qur’ān, these requirements revolve around three principles that are not contradictory but rather complementary: rational,

⁶ See for example al-Baqara 2/112, 115; al-Qaṣaṣ 28/88; al-Rahmān 55/27; al-Layl 92/20.

⁷ See for example al-Baqara 2/114; al-Mā’ida 5/4; al-An’ām 6/118, 119, 121, 138; al-Nūr 24/36; al-Rahmān 55/78.

⁸ See Abū ‘Abd Allāh Fakhr al-Dīn Muhammad ibn ‘Umar ibn Husayn al-Rāzī, *Asās al-Taqdīs fi ‘ilm al-kalām/Allah’ın Aşkanlığı*, trans. İbrahim Coşkun (Istanbul: İz Publications, 2011), 115-116.

⁹ See Abū l-Qāsim Mahmūd ibn ‘Umar ibn Muhammad al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghavāmīdh al-tanzīl wa ‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fi wujūh al-ta’wīl*, trans. Muhammed Coşkun et al. (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı Publications, 2018) 4/302-303.

¹⁰ See Abū l-Ḥassan Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, critical ed. ‘Abd Allāh Mahmud Shahhāta (Beirut: Mu’assasa al-Tārikh al-‘Arabī, 1423/2002), 3/28; Abū Mansūr Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmūd al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, critical ed. Ahmet Vanhoğlu, ed. Bekir Topaloğlu (Istanbul: Dār al-Mizān, 2005), 9/198-199; Abū ‘Abd Allāh Fakhr al-Dīn Muhammad ibn ‘Umar ibn Husayn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr: Mafātīh al-Ghayb*, trans. Suat Yıldırım et al. (Istanbul: Huzur Publications, 2008), 15/513; Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmi’ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasa al-Risāla, 1427/2006), 14/62; Nāsir al-Dīn Abū Sa’īd ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar ibn Muhammed al-Shirāzī al-Baydāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl* (Beirut: Dār İhyā al-Turās al-‘Arabī, 1418/1998), 4/28.

¹¹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Asās al-Taqdīs fi ‘ilm al-kalām*, 116; see also Abū Muhammad ‘Ali ibn Ahmad ibn Sa’īd ibn Hazm, *al-Faṣl: Dinler ve Mezhepler Tarihi*, trans. Halil İbrahim Bulut (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Başkanlığı Publications, 2017), 2/180, 181.

¹² Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, 1/519.

¹³ al-An’ām 6/12, 54.

ethical, and divine principles. When one does not adhere to these rational, ethical, and divine principles, Allah advises humans to be mindful of their actions towards Him (*wa-yuḥazzirukumū llāhu nafsaḥū*).¹⁴ This warning is related to the punishment that Allah Himself will administer.¹⁵

1.1.2. It is Used for Human/Individual

In this sense, the term “nafs” is employed in various contexts, including: a) The killing of a person (*qatalum nafsan*).¹⁶ b) The individual’s sole responsibility for oneself (*lā tukallafu illā nafsaka*) and the determination of this responsibility in relation to the inherent capabilities (*wus‘ahā/ātāhā*) placed within human existence (*nafs*).¹⁷ c) Striving for the cause of Allah both individually and materially (*bi-amwālihim wa-anfusihim*).¹⁸ d) The supervision/protection of each individual (*in kullu nafsin lammā ‘alayhā ḥāfiẓ*).¹⁹ e) Negative actions with individual or societal implications, the inability to construct belief on a sound foundation, ignoring divine discourse, violating the parameters set by Allah for humans (*ḥudūdullāh*), and the harm inflicted on oneself, in other words, turning injustice against one’s own existential potential (*ẓalamū anfasahum-ḥasirū anfasahum*).²⁰ f) The existence of the human being (*anfus*) serving as evidence for the Creator’s existence.²¹ In these examples and many other verses,²² “nafs” is used in reference to the “individual self”, encompassing various dimensions such as rational, ethical, doctrinal, sociological, conscience-related, and more.

This meaning is also present in the uses of “in favor of oneself (*li-nafsihi*)”²³ and “to the detriment of oneself (*‘alā nafsihi*)”²⁴ In this context, expressions such as “being tested with oneself (*la-tublawunna fī ... anfusikum*)”²⁵ or “diminishing from oneself (*wa-naqṣin mina l ...*

¹⁴ Āl ‘Imrān 3/28, 30.

¹⁵ Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, 1/270.

¹⁶ al-Baqara 2/72; see also al-Mā’ide 5/32, 45; al-An’ām 6/151; al-Isrā’ 17/33; al-Kahf 18/74; Tâ Hâ 20/40; al-Furqān 25/68; al-Qaṣaṣ 28/19, 33.

¹⁷ al-Baqara 2/233, 286; al-Nisā’ 4/84; al-Mā’ide 5/105; al-An’ām 6/152, 164; al-A’rāf 7/42; al-Mu’minūn 23/62; al-Ṭalāq 65/7.

¹⁸ al-Nisā’ 4/95; al-Anfāl 8/72; al-Tawba 9/20, 41, 44, 81, 88; al-Ḥujurāt 49/15; al-Şaff 61/11; see also al-Baqara 2/207.

¹⁹ al-Tāriq 86/4.

²⁰ See al-Baqara 2/54, 57, 231; Āl ‘Imrān 3/117, 135; al-Nisā’ 4/64, 97, 110; al-An’ām 6/12, 20; al-A’rāf 7/9, 23, 53, 160, 177; al-Tawba 9/36, 70; Yūnus 10/44, 54; Hūd 11/21, 101; Ibrāhīm 14/45; al-Nahl 16/28, 33, 118; al-Kahf 18/35; al-Mu’minūn 23/103; al-Naml 27/44; al-Qaṣaṣ 28/16; al-Ankabūt 29/40; al-Rūm 30/9; Sabā’ 34/19; Fāṭir 35/32; al-Şāffāt 37/113; al-Zumar 39/15; al-Shūrā 42/45; al-Ṭalāq 65/1.

For different uses of self(*nafs*)-inflicted harm from one’s actions, see al-Baqara 2/9, 90, 102, 130, 187; Āl ‘Imrān 3/69; al-Nisā’ 4/107, 113; al-An’ām 6/24, 26, 123; al-Tawba 9/42; al-Zumar 39/53.

²¹ Fuṣṣilat 41/53; al-Dhāriyāt 51/21.

²² See al-Baqara 2/44, 228, 240; Āl ‘Imrān 3/145, 154, 185; al-Nisā’ 4/63, 79; al-Mā’ide 5/25; al-An’ām 6/158; al-A’rāf 7/188; Yūnus 10/49, 100; Yūsuf 12/ 53, 54; al-Ra’d 13/33, 42; al-Nahl 16/7; al-Kahf 18/74; al-Anbiyā’ 21/35; al-Nūr 24/6, 61; al-Ankabūt 29/57; Luqmān 31/34; al-Sajda 32/13, 17, 27; al-Aḥzāb 33/6; al-Zumar 39/56; al-Tahrīm 66/6.

²³ al-Ankabūt 29/6; see also al-Baqara 2/110, 272; Āl ‘Imrān 3/ 178; al-An’ām 6/104; al-Tawba 9/35; Yūnus 10/108; al-Isrā’ 17/15; al-Naml 27/40, 92; al-Rūm 30/44; Luqmān 31/12; Fāṭir 35/18; al-Zumar 39/41; al-Jāthiya 45/15; al-Taghābun 64/16; al-Muzzammil 73/20.

²⁴ al-Fath 48/10; see also al-Nisā’ 4/111, 135; al-An’ām 6/24, 104, 130, 164; al-A’rāf 7/37, 172; al-Tawba 9/17; Yūnus 10/23, 108; al-Isrā’ 17/15; Sabā’ 34/50; al-Zumar 39/41, 53; al-Jāthiya 45/15; Muhammad 47/38; al-Qiyāma 75/14.

²⁵ See for example Āl ‘Imrān 3/186.

anfusi)”²⁶ are understood to refer to various difficulties and afflictions that may befall individuals, such as illness, injury, or captivity.²⁷ Additionally, the term is used in a way that can denote “society” or “community.”²⁸ The use of this word for a group of people confirms its meaning.

1.1.3. It is Used for Inanimate Beings

It is observed that the word is used for lifeless idols that are taken as gods. In the relevant verses,²⁹ it is emphasized that these beings, which are attributed with divine qualities, cannot even benefit or harm themselves (*li-anfusihim*). By highlighting these characteristics of idols, individuals are expected to engage in rational questioning and draw conclusions about the ineffectiveness and non-divinity of these beings.³⁰ The term “nafs” is used in this type of usage to signify a being in reference to itself.

2. Nafs in the Sense of the Ground of Human Creation

It is observed in the Qur’ān that the nature of human creation is narrated through the term “nafs.” In the relevant verses (*halaqakum min nafsin wāhidatin wa-halaqa minhā zawjahā*),³¹ the word “nafs” is used to emphasize the essence of the creation of the human being.³² This essence encompasses all genders of the species, both female and male,³³ and refers to the *principles*³⁴ of the material composition of humans and the attributes they will possess.³⁵ The emphasis on the

²⁶ See for example al-Baqara 2/155.

²⁷ See Abū Ja‘far Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī, *Tafsīr al-Tabarī: Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, trans. Kerim Aytekin et al. (Istanbul: Hisar Publications, 1996), 2/417; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1/564-565, 1156-1157; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 7/256; al-Baydāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl*, 1/114-115; 2/53.

²⁸ al-Anfāl 8/53; al-Ra‘d 13/11. When the word “nafs” is used in the plural form and attributed to others, meaning addressing the other members of society, it signifies “each other” in the Qur’ān. Thus, it carries the sense of essence and individuality. An important example of this usage can be found in Bakara 2/54. See Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, 1/107-108; al-Tabarī, *Tafsīr al-Tabarī*, 1/214-216; al-Māturidī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 1/127-130; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1/380-381; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 3/8-11; al-Baydāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl*, 1/81.

²⁹ See al-A‘rāf 7/192, 197; al-Ra‘d 13/16; al-Anbiyā’ 21/43; al-Furqān 25/3.

³⁰ See Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, 2/80, 81, 373; 3/81, 226; al-Māturidī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 6/140-141; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2/1060-1061; 3/742-743; 4/440-441, 810-813; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 7/252; 11/202, 208; 13/423; 16/148; 17/176; al-Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 12/47; al-Baydāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl*, 3/184.

³¹ al-Nisā’ 4/1; see also al-An‘ām 6/98; al-A‘rāf 7/189; al-Zumar 39/6.

³² Hüseyin Atay, “Nefis”, *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 37 (1997), 58.

³³ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 7/310-311.

³⁴ The fundamental meaning of the root “ḥ-l-q” is “taqdīr.” “Taqdīr” is then defined as “to proportion and measure an object in a proper/regulated manner.” Therefore, it can be said that the verb “ḥaleqa” indicates both the material form and the structural makeup of the relevant entity. See Abū ‘Abd ar-Rahmān al-Khalīl ibn Ahmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-Ayn*, critical ed. ‘Abd al-Hamīd Hindāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1424/2003), “ḥ-l-q” root; Abū Mansūr Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Azhari, *Tahdhīb al-Lughah* (Cairo: Dār al-Qawmiya, 1964), “ḥ-l-q” root; Abū Nasr Ismā‘il ibn Hammād al-Jawharī, *Al-Sihah: Tāj al-Lughah wa Sihāh al-‘Arabiyyah*, critical ed. Ahmad ‘Abd al-Ghafūr ‘Attār (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm lil-Malāyīn, 1399/1979), “ḥ-l-q” root.

³⁵ For detailed information on the identical nature of the creation stages of women and men, the absence of any differences in terms of existential value, the lack of any ontological inequality between them, and their joint possession of all the fundamental characteristics of the species see Tuğba Günel, “Ontolojik Statüsü Açısından Kadın”, *Düşüncede Müslüman Kadın*, ed. Feyza Betül Köse (Istanbul: Ensar Publications, 2021), 39-58.

essence of human beings can be considered as self-emphasis. This emphasis is supported by the 7th to 10th verses of the surah al-Shams: “By the nafs and He who proportioned/designed it (*sawwāhā*), and then gave it the ability (*fa-alhamahā*) to do wickedness and righteousness (*fucūrahā wa-taqwāhā*). Successful is the one who improves himself/herself (*man zakkāhā*) and failed is the one who corrupts himself/herself (*man dassāhā*).” Here, the nafs is approached in a neutral context. Indeed, a structure that is attributed positive or negative value based on preferences must be neutral in essence. In this regard, the nafs, by its nature, appears as a potential structure that does not accept a division into right-wrong, good-bad, beautiful-ugly; rather, it can embody both directions of dual-polar action styles, such as right-wrong, good-bad, and beautiful-ugly. In other words, the human/nafs is a sum of possibilities and ownerships awaiting functionalization, and these possibilities and ownerships are specific to the human species, not to any individual. The use of *fa-alhamahā* in the verse also supports our approach. The root “*la-hi-ma*”, meaning “to swallow,” implies the inclusion of something in essence. For example, an army that swallows/conceals its enemy is called *jayshun luhāmun* and a horse that swallows/obscures the ground it steps on due to its speed is called *farasun lahimun*.³⁶ Therefore, in the verse, the fundamental movement patterns of the human essence³⁷ are indicated by this root.

In this respect, the notion that the nafs inherently possesses negative qualities, particularly expressed in the context of the statement “*wa-mā ubarri’u nafsī, inna n-nafsa la-ammāratun bi-sū’i*” in the 53rd verse of Surah Yūsuf,³⁸ does not seem acceptable from a Qur’ānic perspective. “This verse has a specific context related to the desire of the wife of the Egyptian Aziz and her attempts to approach and seduce Messenger Yusuf by deceit and plotting, as mentioned in five places³⁹ in the surah (*rāwadtuhu ‘an nafsihī*).⁴⁰ In verses 51-53 of Surah Yūsuf, an admission is made following the revelation of this situation. Therefore, the individual persistently continuing this negative behavior (*la-ammāratun*) is a specific person who confesses to his actions by saying, *mā ubarri’u nafsī*. The term “al-nafs” used after the expression *mā ubarri’u nafsī* also refers to this specific individual. In this context, it becomes evident that this verse should not be considered as a general principle regarding the nafs. The fact that the nafs’s potential to choose between good and bad actions is activated in favor of the “bad” one does not make it bad from an essential point of view; it shows that the bad is preferred⁴¹ in a specific event or situation.”⁴²

Similarly, the fact that the nafs can be characterized with attributes such as *lawwāma*, *mutma’inna* and *zakiyya* also leads to the conclusion that the nafs, by its nature, cannot be “bad.” Changing a quality inherently possessed is impossible. If a structure can be endowed with

³⁶ Khalīl ibn Ahmad, *Kitāb al-‘Ayn*, “l-h-m” root; al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*, “l-h-m” root.

³⁷ The 8th verse of Surah Shams and the 10th verse of Surah Balad are suitable to be read in parallel.

³⁸ See Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, 2/340; al-Tabarī, *Tafsīr al-Tabarī*, 5/31-32; al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 7/322; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 3/626-629; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 13/261-264; al-Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmi’ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 11/375-377; al-Baydāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl*, 3/167.

³⁹ Yūsuf 12/23, 26, 30, 32, 51.

⁴⁰ al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 3/562-563, 574-581.

⁴¹ The verses such as al-Nisā’ 4/128, al-Mā’ida 5/30, 80; Yūsuf 12/18, 83; İbrāhīm 14/22; Tā Hā 20/96; al-Najm 53/23; al-Hashr 59/9 should also be approached with this perspective.

⁴² Günel, *Nefs Fenomenolojisi*, 37-38.

different characteristics, it has a neutral nature. In this context, it should be emphasized that every moral value attributed to the nafs, whether positive or negative, is not an essential quality of the nafs but corresponds to the individual’s choice in specific events and situations. In other words, it is observed here that the nafs is evaluated not in terms of its essential nature but in terms of descriptive qualities. Consequently, it can be inferred that the term “nafs” is used to denote the inherent potential of human creation, free from any classification, nationality, gender, or moral value.

3. Nafs in the Sense of Being a Form of Existence

In the context of the type of existence, the term “nafs” is used to refer to a community sharing common characteristics in three dimensions: a) In the verse “The creation of all of you and your resurrection is like the creation and resurrection of a single nafs (*ka-nafsin wāḥidatin*)”,⁴³ the term “nafs” is used in the context of the type of existence. This usage indicates that the system established by Allah for the human species is the same for each individual, and every individual is subject to the same principles. b) The foundation for women and men to be equal partners (*zawj*) to each other is established on the basis of belonging to the same type of existence and is expressed through the term “nafs” (*ja’ala lakum min anfusikum azwājan*).⁴⁴ Thus, it points to the commonality of the ontological status and characteristics of women and men; in other words, their existence within the same ontic category. c) The term “nafs” is used to indicate the existential category to which the messenger belongs. The expression *rasūlun min anfusikum*⁴⁵ shows that for the messenger, no category other than being “human” can be established. In other words, it is emphasized that the messenger does not possess any qualities beyond humanity and does not harbor characteristics that do not belong to the human species. From this perspective, it can be concluded that the ability to receive revelation exists ontologically in every human being, but this ability is activated only by Allah’s choice and will for that person. Therefore, being a messenger is not a supernatural quality but rather a “mission” assigned by Allah.

4. Nafs in the Sense of the Intellectual Dimension of Human

The external actions of a person in the outside world go through an internal process before reaching this stage. This process, inherently, can be operated positively or negatively at times. In this context, a significant point to note is the indication of the self as the center of thought (*yatafakkarū fī anfusihim*⁴⁶ - *wa-zkur rabbaka fī nafsika*⁴⁷). Similarly, belief is associated with the principled attitude of the mind (*fī anfusihim*), and here the term “nafs” is used.⁴⁸

⁴³ Luqmān 31/28.

⁴⁴ See al-Nahl 16/72; al-Rūm 30/21; al-Shūrā 42/11.

⁴⁵ al-Tawba 9/128; see also Āl ‘Imrān 3/164; al-Nahl 16/89.

⁴⁶ al-Rūm 30/8.

⁴⁷ al-A’rāf 7/205.

⁴⁸ See al-Nisā’ 4/65-66.

The description of situations where a person performs actions that are not explained for some reasons or does not correspond to their true thoughts is also made with the term “nafs”.⁴⁹ In this sense, the use of *fī anfusihim* can be said to parallel the uses of *fī şudūrikum* and *fī qulūbikum*.⁵⁰ Consistent with the potential to be suitable for both good and bad directions, “nafs” is also used with reference to the negative aspect of mental action. For example, in the 16th verse of Surah Qaf (*wa-naʿlamu mā tuwaswisu bihī nafsuhū*), the verb “waswasa” is used together with “nafs”. The completely negative context in which the verb “waswasa” is used in the Qurʾān⁵¹ implies that the mental state expressed in the verse is also negative. However, considering the linguistic usage, the root meaning of the verb “waswasa” can suggest that in the verse, the term “nafs” is used to encompass every thought, whether positive or negative, passing through a person’s mind. From another perspective, in the Qurʾān, “nafs” is also used for the psychological states experienced from a psychological standpoint. Examples include: *bāhīʿun nafsaka*,⁵² *fī nafsihī hīfatan*,⁵³ *ḥasadan min ʿindi anfusihim*,⁵⁴ *istakbarū fī anfusihim*,⁵⁵ *fī anfusihim nādīmīn*,⁵⁶ *dāqat ʿalayhim anfusuhum*.⁵⁷

In addition to indicating a person’s essence, the use of the term “nafs” for a person’s mental structure, thoughts, psychological state, and feelings is essential. Because expressing both the outward appearance and the internal structure of a being with the same word excludes the conception of a dualistic structure and implies that the Qurʾān evaluates humans as a whole.”

5. Nafs in the Sense of the Afterlife Existence

The human entity, expressed with the term “nafs”, which signifies its creation, actions of varying moral values, and its intellectual and psychological structure, is also used for death and the afterlife.⁵⁸ In this context, death is presented as a common law that equalizes all humans. In other words, the lifespan, determined by the Creator (*bi-izni llāh*) and subject to a specific law (*kitāban muʿajjalan*),⁵⁹ will inevitably come to an end (*kullu nafsin zāʿiqatuʾl-mawt*).⁶⁰ This is true for every human being (*li-nafsin*). Therefore, death is considered an intrinsic quality of human nature, and the use of the word “zāʿiqa” in the form of an active participle emphasizes this intrinsic quality.

⁴⁹ See al-Baqara 2/109, 235, 284; Āl ʿImrān 3/154; al-Māʿida 5/52; Hūd 11/31; Yūsuf 12/68, 77; al-Isrāʾ 17/25; al-Furqān 25/21; al-Aḥzāb 33/37; Qāf 50/16.

⁵⁰ See for example al-Baqara 2/283-284; Āl ʿImrān 3/154; al-Māʿida 5/52.

⁵¹ See al-Aʿrāf 7/20; Tâ Hâ 20/20; al-Nās 114/4-5.

⁵² al-Kahf 18/6; al-Shuʿarāʾ 26/3; see also Fâtir 35/8.

⁵³ Tâ Hâ 20/67.

⁵⁴ al-Baqara 2/109.

⁵⁵ al-Furqān 25/21.

⁵⁶ al-Māʿida 5/52.

⁵⁷ al-Tawba 9/118.

⁵⁸ See al-Baqara 2/48, 123, 281; Āl ʿImrān 3/25, 145, 161, 185; al-Anʿām 6/70; Yūsuf 10/30; Hūd 11/105; İbrâhîm 14/51; al-Nahl 16/111; al-Isrāʾ 17/14; al-Kahf 18/15; al-Anbiyāʾ 21/35, 47, 102; al-ʿAnkabūt 29/57; Yâ Sin 36/54; al-Zumar 39/70; al-Muʾmin 40/17; Fuşşilat 41/31; al-Zukhruf 43/71; al-Jâthiya 45/22; Qāf 50/21; al-İnfitâr 82/19.

⁵⁹ Āl ʿImrān 3/145; see also al-Munâfiqûn 63/11.

⁶⁰ Āl ʿImrān 3/185; al-Anbiyāʾ 21/35; al-ʿAnkabūt 29/57.

In the Qur’ān, the term “nafs” is also used in verses addressing the state and fate of humans in the afterlife. Accordingly: a) It is the nafs that will be resurrected after the blowing of the trumpet, and it is the nafs that will give a full account of what it did before it died.⁶¹ b) On the Day of Judgment, each nafs will be solely concerned with itself.⁶² Indeed, no one’s efforts will benefit another (*nafsun ‘an nafsin / nafsun li-nafsin*).⁶³ c) The nafs that will receive a just reward or punishment without any injustice for its deeds before death is the same nafs.⁶⁴

The use of the term “nafs” in these five categories provides a comprehensive field of meaning that complements each other. When examining all the verses, it is evident that this term encompasses all aspects of human existence: intellectual, moral, doctrinal, sensory, emotional, sociological, cultural, physiological, psychological, and aesthetic dimensions. Created with the capacity to produce thoughts and actions in these areas of life, evaluated as valuable or worthless based on these productions during life, and judged accordingly in the afterlife, the term “nafs” emphasizes “humanity itself.” This is crucial because it demonstrates that the Qur’ān does not provide a basis for the claim that the nafs is separate from and different than the body.⁶⁵ On the contrary, the Qur’ān emphasizes that humans possess an integral disposition expressed through the term “nafs.”

Conclusion

Revelation is a progressive call for history. It maintains the same characteristic within itself. The principles it presents to its recipients aim to improve their lives. In this regard, the method of revelation is to accurately contextualize the concepts it embodies, transforming them from theoretical/abstract constructs into factual realities in daily life. The use of these concepts in the context of reality, operating through reality/truth, seeks to intellectually convince the recipients and guide them towards actions that fulfill their best interests. With this method, the goal is to elevate individual and social gains for the better. In this context, it can be said that the concept of “nafs” is fundamental for understanding human existence. The two conditions that make a concept fundamental are: a) The first condition is necessity. If a concept plays a significant role in the entirety of the subject and constitutes a key element in the formation of the subject-organism, it means that the concept is fundamental. b) The second condition is fertility. If a concept serves as a center to which different concepts are attached and its analysis is carried out with various other concepts, it also means that the concept is fundamental. In this regard, it is observed that the term “nafs” fulfills these two conditions as a fundamental concept for understanding human beings. Addressing dimensions that constitute the foundation of human existence with this term demonstrates the significance of “nafs” as a key concept.

⁶¹ al-An‘ām 6/70; Yūnus 10/30; Hūd 11/105; al-Isrā’ 17/13-14; Qāf 50/20-21.

⁶² al-Nahl 16/111.

⁶³ al-Baqara 2/48, 123; al-Infīṭār 82/19.

⁶⁴ al-Baqara 2/281; Āl ‘Imrān 3/25, 161, 185; Ibrāhīm 14/51; al-Nahl 16/111; al-Kahf 18/15; al-Anbiyā’ 21/47, 102; Yā Sin 36/54; al-Zumar 39/70; al-Mu‘min 40/17; Fuṣṣilat 41/31; al-Zukhruf 43/71; al-Jāthiya 45/22.

⁶⁵ However, in the literature, a prevailing approach contrasts with our observation. Particularly, it is noted that in the context of a few highlighted verses, the term “nafs” is attributed a meaning that constitutes the essence of a person and implies a distinct and separate identity from the body. For an analysis of the verses used as evidence for this approach and evaluations related to those verses. see Günal, *Nefs Fenomenolojisi*, 44-48.

Thus, the Qur'ān presents “nafs” as *the self that constitutes a whole with all its faculties and capabilities*. In other words, in the Qur'ān, “nafs” is used in reference to *the structural integrity that will make the existence “what it is.”* This is the Qur'ānic response to the human inclination to understand existence by showing it as a holistic response through the term “nafs”, dismissing the dualistic understanding. Approaches developed through the distinction between nafs and body, on the other hand, do not carry a meaning beyond an effort to reconcile/harmonize dualistic thinking influenced by Greek, Indian, Egyptian, and Sumerian philosophies with Islam. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the early Mutazilite, Ash'ari, and Maturidi literature, collectively, emphasize the integral treatment of humans and the avoidance of dualistic understanding. This situation indicates that being a theist does not necessitate being dualistic. The absence of the dualistic consideration of humans in the Qur'ān does not lead to the conclusion that humanity is reduced to mere matter. According to our understanding from the Qur'ān, everything human takes place in the material body; however, everything human is not limited to the material produced by the body. In other words, a human is not identical to the body; the human is the sum of both material and non-material qualities produced by the body and the integral structure of the organism.

Another emphasis on the nafs is that it is not correct to characterize it solely as “evil” from a Qur'ānic perspective. The Qur'ānic use of the term “nafs” contradicts the correctness of characterizing it solely with the quality of “evil.” The use of the term “nafs” in the Qur'ān; a) when used for Allah, b) when associated with creation, c) when seen as a potential, and d) when considered as a thought center, contradicts the perception of “nafs” as inherently “evil.” At this point, it is crucial to highlight that the ability of the nafs/human to do both good and evil, its ability to acquire positive or negative value based on its choices, and, therefore, the fact that being “good” or “bad” is not an inherent quality of the nafs is emphasized. Talking about a neutral nature for humans is important because the human's capacity to reason, to possess will, responsibility, and freedom is grounded in this rational and moral foundation. In this regard, the use of the term “nafs” in the Qur'ān indicates that it is addressed in five categories:

- *Nafs* in the Sense of Existence Itself
- *Nafs* in the Sense of the Ground of Human Creation
- *Nafs* in the Sense of Existence Type
- *Nafs* in the Sense of the Intellectual Dimension of Human
- *Nafs* in the Sense of Afterlife Existence

The usage of the term “nafs” encompasses the ground where both the internal/mental and external actions shape the potential of the existence, and the results of these actions in the character built by this potential. In another sense, it also involves the situation of this state in the afterlife. Therefore, “nafs” undertakes the role of an umbrella concept for the creation, life, death, and afterlife of human beings; thus, it attributes all aspects of human states directly to the human itself. All these uses indicate that the term “nafs” carries the meaning of ‘human existence in all dimensions.’

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