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# Traces of Two Modern Psychological Concepts in the Works of Said Nursi: Hyper-Intention and Paradoxical Intention

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## Abstract

Hyper-intention and paradoxical intention are two concepts first described in psychotherapy by the psychologist Victor Frankl at 1939. Hyper-intention is a strong desire for something to happen; however, most of the times it produces the opposite. Paradoxical intention advice patients to increase the frequency of which they would prefer to inhibit, or to inhibit which they would prefer to increase. Paradoxical intention has been used in the treatment of a variety of psychological problems like obsessive behavior and thinking, insomnia, urinary retention, migraine headaches, anorexia nervosa, phobic neurosis and conversion disorder. Interestingly enough, reflections of these concepts can be seen in the writings of Said Nursi. He believes in the negative effects of hyper-intention in a broader sense which includes the whole being. Moreover, in the case of insomnia, Nursi doesn't only describe the negative effects of hyper-intention; he also recommends its opposite, i.e. paradoxical intention almost in a 'therapeutic' sense.

*Keywords:* Hyper-intention; Psychotherapy; Paradoxical intention; Said Nursi; Victor Frankl

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## Introduction

Said Nursi (1877-1960) is a muslim religious scholar from Bitlis (Turkey nowadays) who witnessed the last years of Ottoman empire and young republic of Turkey. He was born in a Kurdish Sunni family in the east region of the country. During the last decades of the empire, he targeted a reform in the education system by proposing a university project to Sultan Abdulhamid. The main idea of this university was to incorporate the modern sciences in the classic Madrasa education which he found to be insufficient. Nursi's thoughts have influenced millions of muslims both inside Turkey and abroad and has helped the young generation of muslims to form a coalition between sticking to the positive aspects of tradition and integrating easily in the modern world (Turner & Horkuc, 2009; Vahide, 2019).

Nursi is known for his commentary on the Quran 'Risale-i Nur' (Treatise of Light) which exceeds six thousand pages. Although Risale-i Nur can be defined most properly as a theological text; however, a careful reader can find interesting elements of modern sciences

in it. Unfortunately, this aspect of the Risale-i Nur texts has not been researched enough. From this point of view, this paper is both original and unprecedented. The aim of this essay is to reread some passages of Nursi's writings in the light of two modern psychological concepts.

## Methodology

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with the content analysis that uses textual and comparative analysis. First of all, a thorough online search is done on Google Scholar and PubMed using the keywords like Hyper-intention, Paradoxical intention, Logotherapy, Victor Frankl; the related researches were identified and selected. Then, a similar search is performed in the whole collection of Nursi's works using the keywords like intention, greed and sleeplessness. Finally a comparative textual reading is performed between the two sets of texts with a private focus on similarities as well as differences. Authors have tried to apply different hermeneutical approaches such as phenomenological, dialectical and critical as described previously in the literature (Demeterio, 2001) to avoid any reading, comprehension and interpretation bias.

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## Result

### Hyper-intention and Paradoxical intention

Victor Frankl (1905-1997) is an Austrian psychologist, neurologist and author. He has survived from several Nazi concentration camps ahead of annexation of Austria by Nazis. Out of his various published works, 'Man's Search for Meaning' is the most known and it is an international best-seller. Frankl is the founder of a special branch of psychotherapy named 'Logotherapy' derived from the greek word 'logos' standing for 'meaning'. According to this type of therapy, meaning is the driving force and motivation of human actions. This is in contrast to the other two famous psychotherapy schools: Freudian and Adlerian, which focus on sexual desires and striving for superiority correspondingly (Schulenberg et al., 2008).

Frankl has proposed the concepts of 'hyper-intention' and 'paradoxical intention' (PI) as elements of his psychotherapy. According to him, hyper-intention is an excessive desire for something to happen or not. However, most of the time, it brings the opposite: it makes the undesirable occur and the desirable to fly away. Hence, PI, the second concept is a logical counterpart of the first; i.e in order to get a wanted result, one should focus on its opposite. Frankl first described these two terms in his psychotherapy in 1939, although he said that he has started to use this technique on his patients in his private clinic since 1929. Frankl gives practical examples about patients he has used PI to treat, of which cases with anxiety, obsessive compulsive neurosis, sexual neurosis, insomnia and stuttering are some examples (Frankl, 2014).

Frankl mentions in his famous book "Man's Search for Meaning": "Ironically enough, in the same way that fear brings to pass what one is afraid of, likewise a forced intention makes impossible what one forcibly wishes. This excessive intention, or "hyper-intention," as I call it, can be observed particularly in cases of sexual neurosis. The more a man tries to demonstrate his sexual potency or a woman her ability to experience orgasm, the less they are able to succeed. Pleasure is, and must remain, a side effect or by-product, and is destroyed and spoiled to the degree to which it is made a goal in itself." (Frankl, 1963)

After Frankl, paradoxical intention has been used to treat different psychological problems and psychiatric

diseases by different teams and in different parts of the world. Today it is an established non-pharmacological approach described in the literature at least as a part of the treatment for different types of anxiety including agoraphobia<sup>1</sup>, obsessive compulsive disorder, sleep disorders, conversion disorders including refractory non-epileptic events (Chapleau et al., 2013), and even in the context of specific psychotherapy methods (Sharp et al., 2004).

### Nursi and Human Mental Health

There are several researches on the psychological aspects of Nursi's works in the literature (Gaffar, 2021) (Akar, 2020) (Jaafar et al., 2020) (Arroisi & Yuwanda, 2020). Nabil et. Al have proposed a model of psychological well-being based on the Risale-i Nur (inspired from Quran) in which universal values like love, truthfulness, courage, hope, solidarity and sincerity are a set of goals to be attained through four guiding principles and cornerstones of Risale-i Nur: acknowledging weakness of oneself (ajz), awareness of human's neediness (faqr), absorbing compassion (shafakat) and reflective thoughts (tafakkur) (Nabil et al., 2019; Thomas, 2019).

In order to further clarify and better comprehend the framework of Nursi's perspective on psycho-spiritual well-being, we will particularly focus on one of his books, because from a psychological point of view, there are several important remarks to be noted. Nursi has written down a special booklet entitled 'Message for the Sick' in which he prescribes twenty five remedies with the target of helping sick persons to attain a better psycho-spiritual well-being and a more flexible coping with sickness and its consequences. The remedies can be classified and summarized in the following categories: i) acceptance (ridha), ii) positive thoughts (husndhann), iii) remembrance of God (dhikr), iv) patience (sabr), v) gratitude (shukr), vi) detachment (zuhd), vii) prayer/ Supplication (dua), viii) psycho-social support (takaful) (Nabil et al., 2019).

Here in this message, Nursi offers an entirely different perspective for the believer regarding the perception of illness; in which, for many reasons that are argued in the remedies, sickness should be seen as a good and useful thing despite its painful and unpleasant appearance.

First, he emphasizes the relation between anxiety and physical sickness by saying: "In fact, worry doubles the illness, for it causes an immaterial illness of the heart underlying the physical illness; the physical illness subsists through that and persists. Sometimes a minor

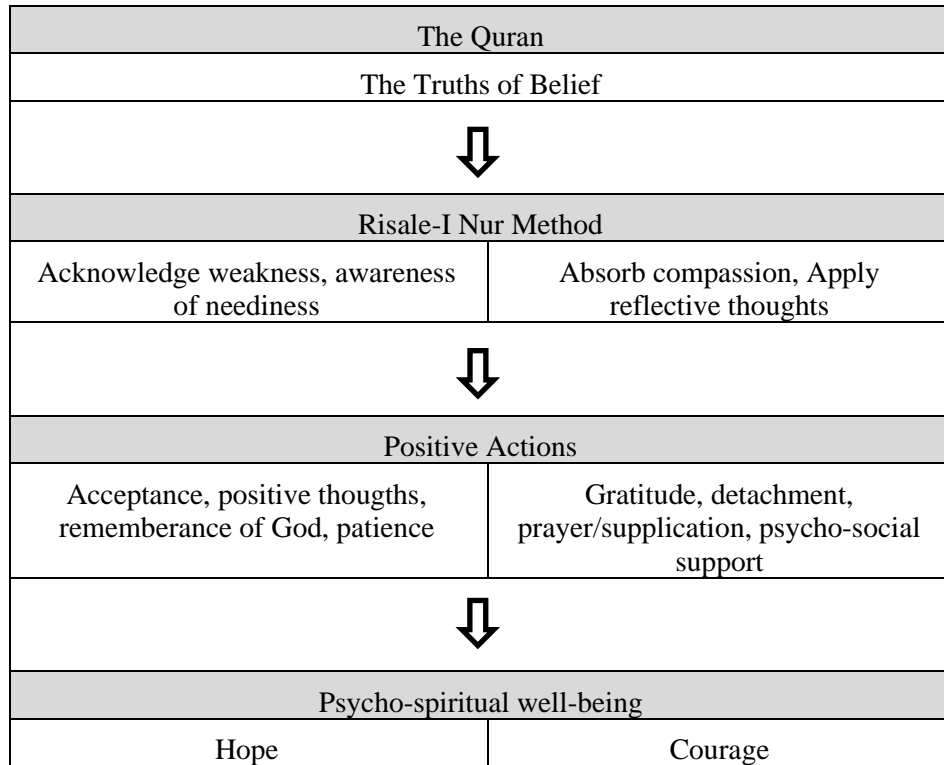


Figure 1: A proposed framework for psycho-spiritual therapy to attain hope and courage based on the Risale-i Nur's perspective (Nabil et al., 2019)

physical illness increases tenfold just through anxiety. If the anxiety ceases, nine tenths of the illness disappears." The negative effects of fear and anxiety on getting sick, perception of pain, prognosis and psychological coping are well established scientific facts (Jensen et al., 2010) (Fabbroni & Resta) (Arntz et al., 1990) (Shibeshi et al., 2007) (Taylor, 2019).

Furthermore, Nursi encourages the reader to find a meaning of the sickness as a remedy that makes the illness more tolerable by elucidating: "Do not look at the outward aspect of illness consider its meaning and be pleased". It is worthy to note the resemblance of the core of this passage with Frankl's logotherapy based on search for meaning.

Moreover, Nursi offers a different lens to the patients who are suffering from a slow and delayed perception of time - a fact which is established in many studies (Thönes & Oberfeld, 2015) - by saying: For life departs like capital...Illness makes that capital of yours yield huge profits. Moreover, it does not allow your life to pass quickly; it restrains it and lengthens it, so that it will depart after yielding its fruits." (B. S. Nursi, 2015)

In addition, Nursi throughout his commentary on Quran, Risale-i Nur, deliberately focuses on the importance of good perspective as a principle. This also has pragmatic consequences; as positive worldview leads to 'positive actions': "A person who sees the good in things has good thoughts. And he who has good thoughts receives pleasure from life." (Nursi, 2005) Good thought and action are especially important for those suffering from a physical and/or psychological problem.

The last but certainly not the least, regarding psychological issues like compulsive and obsessive disorders, Nursi gives the advice of extenuating the disease by writing: "A calamity! The more importance they are given, the more they grow. If you give them no importance, they die away. If you see them as big, they grow bigger... If you do not fear them, they are light and remain hidden. If you do not know their true nature, they persist and become established. While if you do know them and recognize them, they disappear" (B. S. Nursi, 2015) This recommendation, to a great degree, resembles paradoxical intention in Frank's logotherapy which will be discussed in the next section.

## Hyper-intention and Paradoxical Intention

The idea of negative effects of an excess intention is not brand new. Almost in every culture and language 'greed' is blamed and described as a harmful attitude. This is the case in Nursi's works also. The counter-intuitive examples of Said Nursi & Frankl on the subject resemble each other to a surprising extent.

However, Nursi believes in the negative impacts of greed in a broader and universal sense which includes the whole being. Nursi's arguments on how stationary plants are fed better than the ambitious animals, how dumb animals are in a much better nutritional state than the clever and tricky ones and how the baby animals, despite their weakness, enjoy a comfort nurture than the strong ones, are perfect arguments in favor of the disadvantages of greed (hyper-intention in Frankl's logotherapy). This is clearly seen in the following text:

"Greed and contentment have their effects in the animal kingdom in accordance with an extensive law. For instance, the natural contentment of trees needy for sustenance makes their sustenance hasten to them; this shows the huge benefits of contentment. While animals' running after their sustenance greedily and with difficulty and deficiency demonstrates the great loss of greed. Also, the contentment apparent through their tongues of disposition of the helpless young and a pleasant food like milk flowing out to them from an unexpected place, while wild animals greedily attack their deficient and dirty sustenance, prove our claim in clear fashion. Also, the contented attitude of fat fish being the means of their perfect sustenance, and intelligent animals like foxes and monkeys remaining puny and weak because they cannot find sufficient sustenance although they pursue it with greed, again show the degree to which greed is the cause of hardship and contentment the cause of ease." (B. S. Nursi, 2015)

Regarding the negative impacts of greed in human relations, Nursi gives this example: "... if you greedily await the arrival of someone for some important purpose and continually say: "He still hasn't come," ultimately you will lose patience and get up and leave. But one minute later the person will come, and your purpose will be frustrated." (Nursi, 1993)

Nursi thinks this negative outcome of greed (excessive intention in terms of Frankl) is natural; because it is against the normal order of things:

"The production of a loaf of bread requires a field to be cultivated and harvested, the grain to be taken to a mill, and the loaf to be baked in an oven. So too in the arrangement of all things there is a certain slow deliberation decreed by God's wisdom. If on account of greed one fails to act with slow deliberation, one will fail to notice the steps one must mount in the arrangement of all things; he will either fall or be unable to traverse the steps, and in either event will not reach his goal." (Nursi, 1993) Apart from the theocentric language of the text, the author criticizes greed as the enemy of causality, as it triggers impatience, which in turn results in an undesirable outcome. This balances the idea of contentment given in the previous passages and removes away any doubt of fatalism.

Insomnia is one of the conditions where paradoxical intention has been described as a successful method of therapy along with other non-pharmacological treatments (Basit et al., 2020). The basic notion is that excessive preoccupation with trying to get asleep often causes the opposite in patients with difficulties of sleep. It is proposed that the performance anxiety that comes with trying to fall asleep causes the opposite and prevents patients with sleep anxiety from falling asleep (Sharma & Andrade, 2012)

Paradoxical intention has been studied in this context, patients should use this technique by going in the bed and trying to stay awake. It is thought that while the patient's performance anxiety becomes focused on doing the opposite, falling asleep becomes an easier task to achieve and can come spontaneously. Different studies have shown the effectiveness of this method in treating insomnia (Ascher & Turner, 1979; Ladouceur & Gros-Louis, 1986).

Nursi, on the other hand, expresses the same meaning but in different phrases; for example in the case of insomnia, he underlines the negative impacts of excessive desire on the sleep process by saying: "if you are unable to fall asleep at night and wish to do so, you may succeed if you remain detached. But if you desire to sleep greedily, and say: "Let me sleep, let me sleep," then sleep will quit you entirely." (Nursi, 1993) and "Do you not see how greed and eagerness to fall asleep bring on disappointment and insomnia!" (Nursi, 2007) In these words, apart from its true diagnostic aspect, a clear therapeutic notion can be seen. Let's examine another quote in which he mentions insomnia with anxiety: "... You're searching for a cure, but it only increases your sickness and is no

remedy. What you're afflicted with resembles insomnia; you try to sleep, but it only upsets you and banishes your sleepiness. Or you resemble someone whose heart is assailed by worries and this excessive anxiety only compounds his ailment.” (S. Nursi, 2015) There is an established association between insomnia and all types of anxiety. Frankl, when attempting to explain the concept of PI, he emphasizes ‘anticipatory anxiety’; which is ‘fear of fear’. In this case, the individual is in a closed vicious cycle; in which fear helps the undesirable outcome to happen. Therefore, it is recommended for the patient to try to attain the opposite. Nursi, by combining the two aforementioned examples, successfully points out the similarity of both processes and he plainly illustrates a negative cycle.

### Conclusion

In this essay, we have tried to undertake a comparative textual reading between a religious and a modern psychological text. As far as we are concerned and researched, Frankl doesn't elucidate the origin of his ideas of hyper-intention and paradoxical intention. We attempted to find some roots of these concepts in the traditional literature and wisdom. Interestingly enough, in our opinion, we found some passages in Said Nursi's works which hermeneutically -but not literally- share similar meaning and idea with some aspects of Victor Frankl's logotherapy. This is not surprising; since traditional wisdom of the pre-modern era was the trunk of a tree which blossomed and gave the fruit of modern sciences in its ultimate branches.

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