

The Battle Within: Nafs and the Obscuration of Human Light

In the previous essay, we explored the Qur'anic foundations of human light. We saw that Allah created the human being with a spiritual endowment rooted in the rūḥ, and that every person enters the world upon a fitrah inclined toward truth and recognition of the Creator. Yet this raises an unavoidable question: if human beings possess an innate disposition toward truth, why do they so often resist it?

The Qur'an does not answer this question by denying the existence of human light. Nor does it suggest that people fail simply because they lack knowledge. Instead, revelation directs our attention inward—to the nafs.

The nafs occupies a central place in Qur'anic moral psychology. While the rūḥ inclines toward remembrance of Allah and recognition of truth, the nafs pulls toward appetite, self-preservation, pride, and immediate gratification. Human life therefore unfolds as a struggle between competing orientations within the self.

Allah says:

وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا ۖ
فَأَلَّهَمَّهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا ۚ
قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا ۙ
وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا ۚ

"By the soul and Him who proportioned it, so He inspired it with its wickedness and its righteousness. Successful indeed is the one who purifies himself and failed indeed is the one who corrupts himself." (Qur'an 91:7–10)

This passage is among the most profound descriptions of the human condition found in revelation. The Qur'an does not portray humanity as inherently evil, nor as naturally perfect. Rather, human beings possess the capacity for both corruption and righteousness. The struggle is therefore not between humanity and its nature, but within human nature itself.

The Qur'an also speaks of a nafs that actively inclines toward wrongdoing. The wife of Aziz said:

وَمَا أُبْرِئُ نَفْسِي ۚ إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي ۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

"And I do not absolve myself of sins surely the human soul enjoin to evil unless my Lord does bestow His Mercy. Certainly my Lord is Oft-Forgiving and Most Merciful" (Qur'an 12:53)

This verse does not suggest that every desire is evil. Islam does not seek the destruction of desire but its discipline. Hunger, ambition, affection, and self-interest are all natural

dimensions of human existence. The danger arises when desire becomes sovereign and refuses all restraint.

At this point, the human being encounters a critical choice. The fitrah recognizes truth, but the nafs may perceive that same truth as inconvenient. The conscience calls toward accountability, while the ego seeks comfort and control.

The Qur'an repeatedly identifies arrogance as one of the primary causes of spiritual failure:

سَأَصْرِفُ عَنْ آيَاتِيَ الَّذِينَ يَتَكَبَّرُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ

"I will turn away from My signs those who are arrogant upon the earth without right."
(Qur'an 7:146)

Arrogance is not merely excessive self-confidence. In the Qur'anic sense, it is the refusal to submit after recognizing what is true. The archetype of this refusal is Iblis. He knew his Lord. He heard the command. Yet pride prevented obedience.

For this reason, the Qur'an frequently links misguidance with self-sufficiency:

"No! Indeed, man transgresses because he sees himself self-sufficient."

(Qur'an 96:6–7)

The more the human being becomes convinced of his own independence, the less willing he becomes to accept correction. The issue is no longer lack of evidence but resistance to its implications.

The Prophet ﷺ drew attention to another dimension of this struggle when he said:

"Indeed, there is a piece of flesh in the body. If it is sound, the whole body is sound; and if it is corrupted, the whole body is corrupted. Indeed, it is the heart."

(Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)

The heart occupies a unique position between the rūḥ and the nafs. It can incline upward toward remembrance, gratitude, and obedience, or downward toward heedlessness and desire. For this reason, the Qur'an repeatedly speaks of hearts that understand, hearts that soften, hearts that harden, and hearts that become blind.

Allah says:

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونَ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَا أَوْ آذَانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا ۚ فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَى الْأَبْصَارُ وَلَكِنْ تَعْمَى الْقُلُوبُ الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ ٤٦

"Have they not travelled in the land, so that they should have hearts with which they may understand, or ears with which they may hear? Verily it is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts which are in the breast." (Qur'an 22:46)

Spiritual blindness therefore differs from intellectual ignorance. A person may possess information, education, and even religious knowledge while remaining resistant to transformation. The obstacle lies not in what is known but in what is loved, desired, and preferred.

Classical Muslim scholars paid close attention to this reality. Imam al-Ghazālī described the heart as something capable of illumination or obscuration. Repeated obedience polishes the heart, while repeated sin darkens it. Ibn Taymiyyah similarly emphasized that guidance is not merely the possession of knowledge but the willingness to submit to what knowledge demands.

The Qur'an also identifies an important stage in this struggle: heedlessness (ghaflah). A heedless person is not necessarily hostile to truth. Rather, he becomes distracted from it. Immediate concerns, worldly ambitions, social pressures, and personal desires gradually occupy the space that remembrance once held.

Over time, repeated indulgence can dull moral sensitivity. What once disturbed the conscience begins to feel normal. What once felt shameful becomes acceptable. The human light remains present, but its influence becomes increasingly obscured.

Yet the Qur'anic account is not pessimistic.

The nafs is not a prison from which human beings cannot escape. The Qur'an describes different states of the soul, including the self-reproaching soul:

وَلَا أُفْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ ۚ

"And I swear by the self-reproaching soul." (Qur'an 75:2)

The very existence of remorse is evidence that human light has not been extinguished. The conscience continues to call the human being back toward truth.

Ultimately, the struggle between rūḥ and nafs is not a struggle between two separate beings but a struggle within the human person. Every act of obedience strengthens one orientation. Every act of heedlessness strengthens the other. Human character is formed through these repeated choices.

This understanding helps answer the question posed at the end of our previous essay. People do not reject truth because they are incapable of recognizing it. They reject truth because recognition alone does not guarantee surrender. Between knowing and obeying stands the nafs.

Yet another question now emerges. What happens when truth is recognized but repeatedly resisted? What becomes of a heart that learns to live with contradiction between belief and action? The Qur'an gives this condition a name: nifāq, or hypocrisy. It is to that moral fracture that we now turn.