

# SEEKING SELF-WORTH THROUGH COMMODITY NARCISSISM & COMMODITY NIHILISM IN THE LIGHT OF SECULAR AND *TAWHIDI* PARADIGMS

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## **Abstract**

*With the depiction of Western lifestyles in various media outlet at the global level, the desire for conspicuous consumption has reached an all time high. Why do people engage in conspicuous consumption? Generally speaking, we could put these motivations under two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic. In this paper, we will examine one of the intrinsic factors behind conspicuous consumption: self-worth. Even though there are some studies exploring the relationship between self-esteem and consumption, this is the first study exploring the relationship between self-worth and consumption. The paper is organized as follows: First, it provides a brief review of how humans lost value since the Enlightenment through the adoption of a secular paradigm in both the modern and post- modern eras. Second, it examines the engagement of conspicuous consumption due to self-worth depletion through commodity fetishism, commodity narcissism, and commodity nihilism. Third, it outlines the Tawhidi paradigm in terms of its ontological, epistemological, anthropological, and teleological worldviews. Fourth, it explores self-worth from the perspective of Tawhidi paradigm. Fifth, it compares secular and the Tawhidi paradigms in terms of their contribution to conspicuous consumption because of self-worth depletion.*

## **I. Introduction**

Consumers buy goods and services not just for their functions, but also their psychological effect. Particularly, luxury products provide esteem and prestige to consumers in addition to their functional utilities (Arghavan and Zaichkowsky 2000, 485–497). The functional utility of luxury products might even exceed their positional utility

(Vigneron and Johnson 2004, 484-506). Relatively speaking, we can define luxury products as those things “whose ratio of functional utility to price is low while the ratio of intangible and situational utility to price is high” (Nueno and Quelch 1998, 61–68). Thus, conspicuous consumption is to buy luxury goods and services for showing off economic power as a means of either attaining or maintaining a certain social status. The concept was first used by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) in the book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* to describe luxury consumption of the rich social class that was the product of Industrial Revolution.

Luxury consumption is as old as human history. Luxury products have always had an important position among people. With the depiction of Western lifestyles in various media outlet at the global level, the desire for conspicuous consumption has reached and all time high. This is even the case for consumers in emerging markets. Portraying luxury lifestyles as an elegant means to happiness, increasing number of people in the world now engages in conspicuous consumption (Shukla 2011, 242-252).

The global consumer culture is a threat to the planet as well, as argued by a 2012 Royal Society study led by a Nobel Laureate. The study highlights the dangers awaiting people and the planet if the current consumer culture is not stopped (Royal Society 2012). The report warns that “Rapid and widespread changes in the world’s human population, coupled with unprecedented levels of consumption present profound challenges to human health and wellbeing, and the natural environment.” Twenty-two scientists who contributed to the report offer nine recommendations to prevent “social, economic and environmental failures and catastrophes on a scale never imagined” within 30-40 years. They explicitly call for the reduction of material consumption and development of socio-economic systems and institutions that are not dependent on a continued material consumption growth.

Why do people engage in conspicuous consumption? People buy luxury products for many reasons such as product quality, social comparison, social pressure, investment for future, self-actualization, high status, etc. Generally speaking, we could put these motivations under two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic (Carver and Baird 1988,

289-292.). Intrinsic motivations are driven by certain element within oneself while extrinsic motivations are driven by external elements such as social pressure or feeling of guilt. Extrinsic motivation appeals to others while intrinsic motivation appeals to one's inner element.

In this paper, we will examine one of the intrinsic factors behind conspicuous consumption: self-worth. Even though there are some studies exploring the relationship between self-esteem and consumption, there is no study doing the same for self-worth and consumption. For that matter, it is important to define self-worth and explain how it differs from self-esteem. Self-worth is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as "a feeling of confidence in yourself that you are a good and useful person". Self-esteem is defined by *Merriam Webster* as "confidence and satisfaction with oneself, thinking highly of oneself". The synonyms for self-esteem are ego, pridefulness, self-regard, self-respect while antonyms are humbleness, humility, and modesty. Thus, while self-esteem might be ego boosting, therefore, harmful to others, self-worth is the overall assessment of one's value without the ego driven competition element. Self-worth is to value oneself while maintaining humility. On the other hand, self-esteem may involve lifting oneself up above others which may boost one's ego and is not truly a healthy attitude (Baumeister 2005). While self-esteem only involves self-reference in terms of what we feel about ourselves, self-worth also includes the manner in which others perceive us.

## **II. De-valuation of Humanity though Secular Paradigm in Modern and Post-modern Eras**

Many studies suggest that luxury consumption is driven by value/status-seeking behavior. In another words, people do not buy high-status goods for their function, but mostly for their position. For that matter, it is important to explore the history of human value (self-worth) since the Industrial Revolution in order to understand the intrinsic motivation behind luxury consumption. One can argue that humans lost their intrinsic worth since the Enlightenment. They have tried to re-gain their values through the culture of possession.

The Enlightenment project emerged as a secular project

challenging the power and legitimacy of the Church in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Aydin 2013, 13). The Enlightenment thinkers replaced irrational and contradictory Judeo-Christian paradigm with a secular one. According to the Judeo-Christian teaching, humans have the highest values in the universe since they have been created in God's image. It is a human-centered universe in which everything is created to serve humans. The secular paradigm of the Enlightenment had to de-value the inherent worth of humans since it denied the very existence of God. Particularly, with the theory of evolution, secular science rejects the supreme value of human beings and embraces the idea that we are just the last chain of evolutionary process. Many secular scientists follow the footsteps of Darwin to prove that we are just animals evolved from apes.

With the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, the Enlightenment movement did not just remove the Church from power, it also erased its teachings from the minds and hearts of people. It did not stop there. Under the flag of science and development, they began to export their paradigm to the rest of the world. Perceiving the rest of the world as savage, they were aiming to supposedly modernize people. They claimed to bring people from the darkness of religion and mythology to the light of reason and mind. Modernity was portrayed as a progressive, optimistic, rational movement which searches for absolute knowledge and true self (Ward, 2010). The modernity movement lasted until the mid of the last century when it was challenged by the post-modern movement, a movement is associated with exhaustion, pessimism, irrationality, and relativism. In fact, post-modern thinkers lost their faith in technological progress and seriously questioned meaning, self, and reality portrayed by modernity.

Even though post-modernity differs significantly from modernity, it comes from the same root as secular paradigm. They both reject the sublime position of the human being due to their secular, ontological, epistemological, anthropological, teleological, and axiological worldviews. Ontologically, thinkers of modernity such as Locke, Voltaire, Diderot, Hume reject metaphysics and explain the universe through a self-sustaining materialist worldview. They attribute everything in the universe to material causes, nature,

and chance. In other words, they replaced the Christian trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost with the “secular trinity”: “mother nature”, “son of cause-effect”, and “Holy Ghost of chance”(Aydin 2013, 13). Empiricism became the main path to truth. Even though post-modern thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard agree with their predecessors on the materialistic worldview of the universe, they have been confused with findings of Quantum physics. Some of them denied the ontological reality all together, arguing that everything is just an intensive illusion. Likewise, they argue that we live in a constructed reality presented by the media. Even though we know the portrayed reality in media is not real, we pretend that it is real. We are happy to be deceived like the chained people of Plato’s cave.

Epistemologically, modernist thinkers perceive the mind (brain) as the only source of knowledge. They claim that the scientific mind is sufficient enough to discover the mystery of the universe. They believe in the universal laws of nature working like an invisible hand maintaining order and balance in macro and micro-cosmos. They set scientific aspirations to decode these laws in order to control nature for human happiness. They argue that science is a means to the universal truth and reality. As stated by Lyotard in his *Postmodern Condition*, in modern times, science is a substitute for religion in terms of being a means to truth and credibility. Science was considered to be progressing toward “complete knowledge” with its unified fields and universal applicability.

Post-modern thinkers reject the concept of universal truth. They argue that everything is subjective and relative. As we cannot claim universal truth about a physical phenomena with certainty, we cannot also talk about universal moral values. Anything and everything could be true. Post-modern thinkers give up the idea of reaching “complete knowledge”. They also lost their faith in science which contributes to human progress as a coherent and compatible body of knowledge. For instance, Paul Feyerabend argues in his book, *Against Method* (1974), that science is more ‘anarchic’ and ‘pluralistic’ than ‘progressive’.

Furthermore, post-modern thinkers such as Derrida (1976) and Beudrillard (1988) show that scientific knowledge is not as objective

as claimed. They “dissolve” words to show how subjective views are embodied in so-called objective scientific knowledge. They argue that no “pure” knowledge exists outside culture and language. Through the movement called structuralism, the post-modern thinkers argue that knowledge of perceived reality cannot be separated from its representation through language. We use language not just to express our understanding, but organize and even construct our perceived reality. Structures in which we present certain reality also affect meanings which happen only in relation to structures. Indeed, Ferdinand de Saussure argues that words are nothing but signs with associated meaning to communicate with others (Harris 1990). For that matter, anything with attached meaning could be signs and convey certain messages to others. Meanings loaded to signs are built upon certain ‘centers’ and ‘origins’. Derrida makes a compelling argument that these ‘centers’ and ‘origins’ have no basis in reality. They are subjective and mythological.

Anthropologically, the thinkers of modernity believe in universal laws governing human nature as well. They work hard to discover these laws. They establish social science based on their understanding of human nature. They replace spirituality with psychology explaining human behavior through biological and social cause-effect chains. Psychologists such as Sigmund Freud explores the roots of self, helping people know who they are and what they can be. As modern societies offer multiple social roles such as being mothers at homes, nurses at hospitals, activists at unions, people begin getting confused of their true identity. While in the pre-modern era, personal identity was embedded into social relations, as argued by Adorno (1976), mass culture injects capitalist messages to the subconscious of consumers, making them lose their individuality and become part of a mass for the sake of mass consumption. It creates a “one-dimensional man” as argued by Marcuse (1964) .

Even though modernity gives people many roles in which post-modern thinkers not only reject ideas of the universal human nature (Baillie and Casey 2005), they also deny the agreeable unified understanding of self. Some thinkers, such as Jameson, Baudrillard, and Deboard argue that selves developed under modernity have evaporated under consumerism and mass culture. While others such

as Lacan (Benvenuto, Kennedy, and Lacan 1986) and Foucault (Foucault, Gordon, and Gordon 1980) question the very existence of the unified self. They argue that we have divided, multiple selves which manifest themselves throughout life. They even deny the very existence of the human identity. Indeed, Foucault claims that human is just an idea: “As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared ... then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (Foucault 1973, p.387). In his book *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World* (1995), James Glass questions any utility of having multiple selves. He argues that post-modernity removes meaning and substance from identity and turns human to an ambiguous creature.

While modernity removes the difference between human and animal, post-modernity almost eliminates the difference between human and machine. It argues that we will experience the post-human era in which there will be no difference between machine and human. While in the modern era, the human being was alienated through the use of the machine. In the post-modern era, “new technology, new machines, new images, interactive screens” do not alienate people, rather they “form an integrated circuit” (Baudrillard 2009).

Teleologically, even though thinkers of modernity could not deny design and order in the universe, they could not explain them through secular trinity. Therefore, they had to remove teleology from science all together. Since the ancient Greek, order in the universe was explained through Aristotle’s teleological view of the world in which natural phenomena happen for a certain end. The secular paradigm of modernity explains the natural phenomena through chance and material necessity. Post-modern thinkers take it even further denying the ultimate meaning in the universe. Likewise, there is no ultimate purpose for a human. You could be anything and everything you want. There is no ideal self which is socially constructed. You can freely fabricate many identities for yourself throughout your life.

### III. Commodity Fetishism and Commodity Narcissism

Marx, in *Capital* (volume 1), attempts to define commodity fetishism and its secrets. He argues that in a capitalist society, consumers pretend as if goods are self-sustained with its qualities and characteristics, mistakenly denying the fact that they come from labor. Consumers thereby mystify objects assuming they have self-properties while they know in reality it is not true. This is quite similar to the totemic belief in ancient society. Billing argues that commodity fetishism function “through a process of social forgetting” (Billing 1999, 313–29, p.315).

Commodity fetishism might help to understand conspicuous consumption as well, with some modification in meaning. Consumers make a fetish of luxury commodities by pretending they can gain certain values. They try to satisfy their innate desire of being a worthy person in the universe by possessing expensive commodities. Even though they know that the quality of commodities could not be translated to their human quality; they pretend as if it is the case. They think that the value of commodities define their own value.

Post-modern structuralism and semiotics help us to decode value-seeking commodity fetishism. Judith Williamson, in *Decoding Advertisement* (1978), explains how advertisers convey such false message to consumers. For instance, in a cigarette advertisement with the image of cowboy on horseback associates power, health, wealth and outdoor activity with smoking. Thus, smokers might think that they will be empowered when they smoke certain brands of cigarettes.

The other concept which might help to understand conspicuous consumption is “commodity narcissism”. Freud came up with this concept. He argues that people pursue narcissistic satisfaction by thinking they are better than others through material possession (Freud 1962). For that matter, commodity narcissism is to elevate oneself over others through luxury consumption. The self-love is contained in the object-love. However, when commodity fetishism is combined with commodity narcissism, consumers will engage in the elevation of themselves at the destruction of others (Cluley and Dunne 2012, 251). For a narcissist, society is divided into two groups, rich and poor. He tries to distinct himself from poor and

ordinary by looking different through conspicuous consumption.

#### IV. Nietzsche's Last Man and Commodity Nihilism

Nietzsche was well aware of the fall of the human being. He was disgusted with modern life and spent the last decade of his life in isolation. As he declares the death of God in the life of people, he also declares the death of man. He argues that the "last man" of modern society "has no aspiration, but pitiable comfort". In other words, the last man is a decadent one pursuing small pleasures. He does not know "love, knowledge, and reality" (Nietzsche and Martin 2007, p.13). He is like a pleasure seeking machine wounded by happiness. He pursues "poisonous little pleasures". "A little poison now and then: that makes pleasant dreams. And much poison at last for a pleasant death" (Nietzsche 2007, p.14). His life is without any meaning (Nietzsche 2007, p.16). Everything in his life, "All is empty, all is alike, and all has been" (Nietzsche 2007, p.116). He is selfish and cannot go beyond praise and blame (Nietzsche 2007, p.67). He only loves himself (Nietzsche 2007, p.54). Even his love of the neighbor is "bad love" of himself. He is a narcissist and an egoist. "Men who are nothing more than a big eye or a big mouth or a big belly or something else big—I call such people inverse cripples" (Nietzsche 2007, p.120). Men are shattered by modern life. "This is the terrible thing to my eye that I find man broken up, and scattered about, as on a battle- and butcher- ground. And when my eye flees from the present to the past it always finds the same: fragments and limbs and fearful chances- but no men!" (Nietzsche 2007, p.121).

Nietzsche could not believe how people could make small pleasures as worthy aspirations in life. He wept for the fall of the human. He escapes to seclusion to protect himself and prescribe solutions to his fellow beings. He defines his essential goal as "to compose" fragment men "into one and gather together what is fragmented and riddle and fearful chance" (Nietzsche 2007, p.121). He thinks that the human has a great potential to accomplish great things in life. He names his ideal *Übermensch*. Nietzsche's superman should not be confused with Hollywood's superman. Nietzsche refers to *Übermensch* with higher aspiration. With a great mission in life. "Man is rope stretched between the animal and the

*Übermensch* - a rope over an abyss” (Nietzsche 2007, p.11). *Übermensch* does not live for small pleasures. He wants to live for “the sake of his virtue, he wants to live on and to live no more... (his soul) is extravagant, who wants no thanks and returns none... (his) soul is deep, even in being wounded” (Nietzsche 2007, p.12). He tells himself that “I must perfect myself therefore I now avoid my happiness and present myself to every unhappiness” (Nietzsche 2007, p.139). In order to be *Übermensch*, he shall “build over and beyond” himself... he must be “the self-conqueror, the ruler of (his) senses, the master of (his) virtues” (Nietzsche 2007, p.61).

He defines the modern city as a place where “you have nothing to seek and everything to lose” (Nietzsche 2007, p.160). He cries that “everything of today...it is falling, it is decaying” (Nietzsche 2007, 179). He found disgusting that people pursue “the eternal recurrence of the smallest” (Nietzsche 2007, p.188). He thinks that people are fragmented in modern life (Nietzsche 2007, p.120). “The world never sank so deep” (Nietzsche 2007, p.211). It has lost its magic. “There is much filth in the world” (Nietzsche 2007, p.175). The last man who seeks some small happiness in this world does so “by converting to cows” (Nietzsche 2007, 230). Heaven on earth is only possible through this conversion: “Unless we are converted and become as cows, we shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (p.230). He even further argues that we are more “apes than apes”. In other words, we make animal pleasure the center of our life even more than animals. He sees value in such a life. “He who has always overindulged himself is as sickened by his overindulgence” (Nietzsche 2007, p.132). He urges to “spit on the great city that is the great trash heap where all the scum froths together! Spit on the city of compressed souls and narrow chests, of slit eyes and sticky fingers—on the city of the importunate, the shameless, the scribble-and scream-throats, the overheated ambitious ones: where everything infirm, infamous, lustful, gloomy, insipid, ulcerous, and conspiratorial festers together. Spit on the great city and turn back!” (Nietzsche 2007, p.152)

He argues that “many die too late and a few die too early” (Nietzsche 2007, p.63). He envisions the rise of *Übermensch* through three metamorphoses (Nietzsche 2007, p.25). First, he has to turn

camel-kneeling in front of the challenges in life in order excel in virtue. This is “to humiliate oneself in order to mortify one’s pride... to feed on the acorns and grass of knowledge, and for the sake of truth to hunger of soul...” (Nietzsche 2007, p.25) Second, he has to transform to a lion to overcome his ego, to go beyond self. “Always the self listens and seeks; it compares, masters, conquers, and destroys. It rules, and is in control of the “I” too. Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there is a mighty lord, an unknown sage- his name is self.” (Nietzsche 2007, p.32). By being a lion, he “would conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert. (Nietzsche 2007, p.25). Third, he should be a child living like a new born to reality and virtue. “The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning (Nietzsche 2007, p.26). Thus, he could aim for eternity with whom Nietzsche was in true love: “never did I find the woman by whom I wanted children, unless it be this woman whom I love: for I love you O eternity! for I love you O eternity! (Nietzsche 2007, p.197). *Übermensch* will live a life for sake of truth, virtue, and reality without fear of being blamed or desire of being praised.

Nietzsche believes that modern man is surrendered by a marketplace in which lie poisonous flies. He has to run to solitude in order to preserve his life. “Where solitude ends, there the marketplace begins; and where the marketplace begins, there begins also the noise of the great actors and buzzing of the poisonous flies” (Nietzsche 2007, p.46). These flies of the marketplace “want blood from you in all innocence, their bloodless souls crave blood- and therefore they sting in all innocence” (Nietzsche 2007, p.47). “They buzz around you even with their praise and their praise is importunity. They want to be close to your skin and your blood” (Nietzsche 2007, p.48). The solution is to escape to solitude: “Feel, my friend, into your solitude: I see you stung all over by the poisonous flies.... Flee into your solitude! You have lived too closely to the small and the pitiable. Flee from their invisible vengeance! Towards you they have nothing but vengeance” (Nietzsche 2007, p.47).

Nietzsche names the value crisis of modern man as nihilism. He perceives nihilism as a widespread phenomenon which could be seen as the root of many social problems. Even though he discusses

the problem of nihilism in many of his writings, he gives explicit warning in his notebooks which were published posthumously (Nietzsche and Handwerk 2013). Nietzsche portrays nihilism as emptying the world and human life from any meaning, purpose, morality, and essential value. In his notebooks, Nietzsche refers to the death of Christianity as the beginning of nihilism. In his view, Christianity was the source of intrinsic value and morality in the West. It was also the source of objective knowledge and truth. In other words, people used to believe in the existence of God as real and Christianity as the authentic knowledge from God. They would live their life within Christian ideals trying to fulfill their God-given mission. Ironically, it was the drive for truth that eventually led to the death of God and the removal of Christianity from the heart of people. In his famous aphorism of the madman in the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche declares the death of God at the hand of human. He was literally saying to Christian establishments that you can not deceive us by your conflicting concept of God and contradicting religious edicts. As rational modern men, we cannot accept such “baloney” beliefs. Thus, if there was no God, there was no room for God-centered morality and meaning. Nietzsche was aware of the cost of killing God. For him, the death of God was like the death of the Sun for the earth. It was the fall to darkness. It was the fall to infinite nothing:

*“But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning?”*(Nietzsche, Kaufmann, and Kaufmann 1974)

With the death of God, Nietzsche was warning humanity of the problem of nihilism as one of the greatest problems ever: "I praise, I do not reproach, [nihilism's] arrival. I believe it is one of the greatest crises, a moment of the deepest self-reflection of humanity. Whether man recovers from it, whether he becomes master of this crisis, is a question of his strength!" (Levy 1923)

Nietzsche defines a nihilist as follows: "a man who judges of the world as it is, that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be, that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of 'in vain' is the nihilists' pathos — at the same time, as pathos, [it is] an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists" (Nietzsche and Handwerk 2013).

In short, nihilism can be defined as the devaluation of the highest values. It is the devaluation of sacred texts. It is the devaluation of morality. It is the devaluation of the human being. According to Heidegger, the principle motive behind this devaluation is the "will to power". Ironically, the "will to power" was also the principle of every earlier valuation of values. (Müller Lauter 1999, p.268).

Nietzsche's nihilism might help us to understand the intrinsic motive behind conspicuous consumption. We can talk about "commodity nihilism" in two different meanings. First, it means to consume for the sake of consumption (or some small pleasure) without considering any higher goals such as aesthetic or humanistic values. It is like pursuing "pitiable comfort" by aiming to make money and consume without having any goal of innate growth. Second, "commodity nihilism" means to consume to close the gap of lost inherent values of being a human being. It is value-seeking by those who think they do not have any inherent value anymore. It is an attempt to substitute extrinsic values with intrinsic ones. It is an effort to fill the abyss left with the death of God.

## V. Defining the *Tawhidi* Paradigm

*Tawhid* is the main pillar of the Qur'anic worldview. Indeed, one can say that the first and foremost purpose of Islam is to establish *tawhid* in the heart, mind and life of believers. In Islamic teachings, we can

relate everything to *tawhid*. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) made *tawhid* the core of his mission. Likewise, the most important message in Qur'an is *tawhid*. Therefore, we prefer to call the Islamic paradigm the *Tawhidi* paradigm.

Traditionally, *tawhid* is divided into three categories: *tawhid ar-rububiyah*, *tawhid al-uluhiyyah*, and *tawhid al-asmaa' wa-sifaat*. *Tawhidi rububiyah* is to believe with verified evidence that God is not just the Creator of everything, He is also the Provider and the Sustainer of everything every moment. He is the One running all affairs of the creation from moment to moment. Material causes are just veils, not the real cause behind the effect. He is the only Cause of everything. *Tawhid al-uluhiyyah* means to recognize and worship God alone as Creator. Thus, all acts of obedience and worship should be directed to God alone. *Tawhid al-asmaa' wa-sifaat* is to believe and understand God as described in the Qur'an and Hadith in a holistic manner.

Nursi provides another categorization for *tawhid*. He states that *tawhid* is of two sorts: superficial and authentic. The superficial one is to believe in the unity of God without knowing verified evidence. It is to imitate others and saying "Almighty God is One, He has no partner or like. This universe is His." The authentic one "through *seeing on everything* the stamp of His power, the seal of His dominicality, and the inscriptions of His pen, is to open a window directly onto His light from everything and to confirm and believe with almost the certainty of seeing it that everything emerges from the hand of His power and that in no way has He any partner or assistant in His Godhead or in His dominicality or in His sovereignty, and thus through this to attain to a sort of perpetual awareness of the Divine presence." (Nursi 1996b, p.300) Thus, while superficial *tawhid* is sheer acceptance of unity of God without seeing evidence, the authentic *tawhid* is to set belief on unequivocal evidence through bear-witnessing stamp, seal, and inscription of God on everything.

Nursi explains the two types of *tawhid* through the following example: "If the goods of a rich man arrive in a market or a town, there are two ways in which one may know they are his. One is briefly and simply, as with ordinary people, which is: "No one apart from him is capable of owning this vast amount of goods." However,

when under the supervision of such a man much of it may be stolen. Many others may claim ownership to parts of it. The second scenario is this: by reading his writing on every packet, recognizing his signature on every roll, and seeing his seal on every bill, the man can declare: "Everything belongs to that person." Here, everything in effect shows the important man" (Nursi 1996b, p.300). The rich man in the story represents God and the goods stand for the entire creation. Thus, authentic *tawhid* is to see and recognize the signature and seal of the Owner on everything other than making a guess on who might be the owner.

*Tawhid* as explained above plays a central role in the Islamic worldview. Therefore, we think it is proper to name the Islamic paradigm *Tawhidi* paradigm which offers *tawhidi* ontological, epistemological, anthropological, and teleological worldviews. Ontologically, according to the *Tawhidi* paradigm, God is real (Haq) and the source of all reality (haqiqah). He is the Necessary Existence, meaning that without Him nothing could exist. Everything else is contingent upon the existence of God. He creates and sustains everything from moment to moment. Everything else relies on His existence every moment. As it is impossible to have a shadow, once you remove the source of an object, it is impossible to have the universe once you sever its ongoing connection with God. Since God is real, everything else connected to Him is real, too. In Nursi's words, "The reality of all things, whether physical, non-physical, essential, non-essential, and the reality of all human beings, is based on a Name and relies on Its reality. Things are not merely on a Name and relies on Its reality. Things are not merely insignificant forms without reality (Nursi 1996, 26<sup>th</sup> Word).

Since the reality of everything is Divine names, epistemologically speaking, true knowledge of reality is possible. Indeed, God is making Himself known through His works in the universe and His words (revelation). There is no contradiction between His works and words. Therefore, there cannot be a contradiction between real scientific knowledge and authentic revelation. One comes from His words, while the other comes from His power. They both complement each other. The ultimate goal is to know God (*ma'rifatullah*) through studying His words and works.

For that matter, to know His existence is different from knowing Himself. While the former is to believe that He exists, the latter is to know His attributes. As Nursi states, if one wants “knowledge of reality and true wisdom”, one should “gain knowledge of the Almighty God. For the realities of beings are rays of the Divine Name of Truth and the manifestations of His Names and attributes” (Nursi 1996, 26<sup>th</sup> Word).

Anthropologically, a human is created upon certain nature (*fitrah*) which has both weakness and strength. His weakness involves his animal soul (*nafs*), his self-centric ego (*ananiyah*) and his anger (*gadabhiyah*) while his strength involves his heart (*qalb*), his conscience (*wijdan*), and his mind (*aql*). He has been given free will to choose his path. The Qur’an and Sunnah provide guidance for how to control the negative side and flourish the positive. The ultimate goal of Islam is to raise perfected the human being (*insan-al-kamil*) through verified belief and virtuous life. Thus, he can become God’s addressee, friend, and beloved.

Teleologically, God creates everything for a certain purpose: “Not without purpose did We create heaven and earth and all between! that were the thought of Unbelievers! but woe to the Unbelievers because of the Fire (of Hell!)” (The Qur’an, 38:27) He is All-Wise acting with perfect wisdom in His works. The Qur’an urges us to see purpose behind God’s works in many verses like the following: “Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which Allah Sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they Trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth; (Here) indeed are signs for a people that are wise” (The Qur’an, 2:167). Thus, wisdom is to study the works of God and see purpose behind them. It is to see the connection between works and names of God. The Qur’an states wisdom as a great bounty to humanity: “He grants wisdom to whom He pleases; and he to whom wisdom is granted receives indeed a benefit overflowing” (The Qur’an, 2:269).

Human gains the highest value through *Tawhidi* ontology,

epistemology, anthropology, and teleology. Ontologically, the human being is the best mirror to Divine Existence. He has been created in the best form with great abilities. Anthropologically, the human being has potential to be the best in the universe and worse. If he follows the Divine guidance, he can control his negative side and unleash his positive side. Epistemologically speaking, he can unleash his potential through the knowing of his God by studying His words and works together. Teleologically speaking, every human is created to reach a level that can even surpass angels. He can gain the highest value by being a friend to God.

## **VI. Human Value in the *Tawhidi* Paradigm**

As *tawhid* is essential to the Qur'an, the human being is essential to God. Indeed, we can argue that the human is the major project of God (Aydin 2013, 1-34). The ultimate purpose of Islam is to raise the *insan-al kamil* (perfected/ideal human). The Qur'an provides extensive information about the human project: "Remember (when) your Lord said to the angels: "I am setting on the earth a vicegerent. "The angels asked: "Will you set therein one who will cause disorder and corruption on it and shed blood.... He said: "Surely I know what you do not know" (The Qur'an, 2:30). What the angels did not know was that Allah was going to create the best of His creation: "Surely We have created human of the best stature, as the perfect pattern of creation" (95:5). This refers to the potential in a human being which could be unleashed through the Divine guidance. Depending on the use of his comprehensive abilities, the human being "may rise or fall to stations, ranks, and degrees from the lowest of the low to the highest of the high, from the earth to the Divine Throne, and from minute particles to the sun" (Nursi 1996b, p.328).

Indeed, the Qur'an clearly indicates that human beings are potentially superior to all creatures, even angels. Therefore, when Adam was created the angels were asked to "prostrate before Adam! They all prostrated, but Iblis did not; he refused, and grew arrogant, and displayed himself as an unbeliever" (The Qur'an, 2:34). The superiority of Adam was not from wealth or fame, etc. It was from his ability of learning the truth about God in a comprehensive manner. "(Having brought him into existence) God taught Adam the

names, all of them. Then (in order to clarify the supremacy of humankind and the wisdom in their being created and made vicegerent on the earth), He presented them (the things and beings, whose names had been taught to Adam, with their names) to the angels, and said, "Now tell Me the names of these, if you are truthful (in your praising, worshipping, and sanctifying Me as My being God and Lord)" (The Qur'an, 2:31). In Nursi's view, the teaching of names refers to the human being's great potential to learn "countless sciences, and numerous all-embracing branches of knowledge about the universe, and extensive learning about the Creator's attributes and qualities, which afforded man superiority over not only the angels, but also the heavens and earth and mountains in the question of the bearing of the Supreme Trust." The Qur'an (95:5) also warns about the failure of not using this great potential given to human being by saying that he will be "reduced him to the lowest of the low." The only way out from such a failure is to be among "those who believe and do good, righteous deeds" (The Qur'an, 95:6).

From the Islamic perspective, the ultimate purpose of life is to excel in virtuous and sincere deeds in order to fulfill his mission of vicegerent and earn God's pleasure. The Qur'an and Sunnah provides guidance to humans on how to unleash their potential and reach happiness in both worlds. However, this is not granted to everyone. It depends on gaining "verified belief in God (*iman-i billah*)", "knowing God (*ma'rifatullah*)", "living according to the Divine guidance to show his love for God (*muhabbatullah*): "Be certain of this, that the highest aim of creation and its most important result is **belief in God**. The most exalted rank in humanity and its highest degree is the **knowledge of God** contained within belief in God. The most radiant happiness and sweetest bounty for jinn and human beings is the **love of God** contained within the knowledge of God. The purest joy for the human spirit and the sheerest delight for man's heart is the **rapture of the spirit** contained within the love of God" (Nursi 1996a, 20th Letter).

Nursi puts belief in God at the core of human value. "Through the light of belief, man rises to the highest of the high and acquires a value worthy of Paradise. And through the darkness of unbelief, he descends to the lowest of the low and falls to a position

fit for Hell.” This is because of the fact that belief connects man to his Maker and provide basis for *Tawhidi* ontological and epistemological reality. It also helps to understand the innate self (*fitrah*) through *Tawhidi* anthropology and aspiration for the ideal self (*insan-al kamil*) through *Tawhidi* teleology. In Nursi’s terms, “belief connects man to the All-Glorious Maker; it is a relation. Thus, man acquires value by virtue of the Divine art and inscriptions of the dominical Names which become apparent in him through belief. Unbelief severs the relation, and due to that severance the dominical art is concealed. His value then is only in respect to the matter of his physical being. Since this matter has only a transitory, passing, temporary animal life, its value is virtually nothing.” In other words, when belief establishes an ontological connection between man and his maker, it provides also value to him by “virtue of the Divine art and inscription” of His names and attributes. He becomes a precious artifact of God in the universe.

While belief works like light and reveals such ontological and epistemological connections, disbelief works like darkness covering them up. By severing the connection between man and his Maker, disbelief reduces human value to almost nothing. Nursi explains this through the following example: “Among man’s arts, the value of the materials used and that of the art are entirely different. Sometimes they are equal, sometimes the material is more valuable, and sometimes it happens that five dollars worth of art is to be found in material like iron worth five cents. Sometimes, even, an antique work of art is worth a million while the material of which it is composed of is not worth five cents. If such a work of art is taken to the antiques market and ascribed to a brilliant and accomplished artist of former times and announced, mentioning the artist and that art, it may be sold for a million dollar. Whereas if it is taken to the scrap-dealers, the only price received will be the five dollars worth of iron.” For instance, recently a 1932 Picasso painting of his lover, Marie-Therese Walter, was sold for 28.6 million pounds (\$44.8 million) while perhaps its material was worth a few dollars (*Huffington Post* 2013).

Nursi applies the parable above to humans as the great artifact of God: “Thus, man is such an antique work of art of the Almighty

God. He is a most subtle and graceful miracle of His power whom He created to manifest all his Names and their inscriptions in the form of a miniature specimen of the universe. If the light of belief enters his being, all the meaningful inscriptions on him may be read. As one who believes, he reads them consciously, and through that relation, causes others to read them. That is to say, the dominical art in man becomes apparent through meanings like, 'I am the creature and artifact of the All-Glorious Maker. I manifest His mercy and munificence.' That is, belief, which consists of being connected to the Maker, makes apparent all the works of art in man. Man's value is in accordance with that dominical art and by virtue of being a mirror to the Eternally Besought One. In this respect insignificant man becomes God's addressee and a guest of the Sustainer worthy of Paradise superior to all other creatures." In short, as seeing Picasso's signature on a portrait would boost its value a thousand-fold, seeing the manifestation of God's names on a human being increase human value a thousand-fold, particularly when it is understood that human is the best artifact of God in the universe.

On the other hand, unbelief severs the connection between man and his Maker undermining the ontological, the epistemological, the anthropological, and the teleological basis for human excellence and happiness. In Nursi's terms, when "unbelief, which consists of the severance of the relation, enter man's being, then all those meaningful inscriptions of the Divine Names are plunged into darkness and become illegible. For if the Maker is forgotten, the spiritual aspects which look to Him will not be comprehended, they will be as though reversed. The majority of those meaningful sublime arts and elevated inscriptions will be hidden. The remainder, those that may be seen with the eye, will be attributed to lowly causes, nature, and chance, and will become utterly devoid of value. While they are all brilliant diamonds, they become dull pieces of glass. His importance looks only to his animal, physical being. And as we said, the aim and fruit of his physical being is only to pass a brief and partial life as the most impotent, needy, and grieving of animals. Then it decays and departs. See how unbelief destroys human nature, and transforms it from diamonds into coal?"

In short, Nursi argues that believing, knowing, loving God is the only way to happiness. He seems to agree with Nietzsche in arguing that life without God would be meaningless, fruitless, painful: “The person who knows and loves God Almighty may receive endless bounties, happiness, lights, and mysteries. While the one who does not truly know and love him is afflicted spiritually and materially by endless *misery, pain, and fears*. Even if such an impotent, miserable person owned the whole world, it would be *worth nothing* for him, for it would seem to him that he was living a *fruitless life* among the vagrant human race in a wretched world without owner or protector (emphasis added)” (Nursi 1996a, 20th Letter).

### VII. Seeking Self-Worth in Secular and *Tawhidi* Paradigms

As discussed earlier, human beings face great “self-worth depletion” in modern and post-modern areas. They have descended from the sublime position in the universe to that of an animal species. This is due to the nature of the secular paradigm with its ontological, epistemological, anthropological, and teleological worldviews. While modernity defines reality based on materialist and secular worldview and declares the death of God, post-modernity declares the death of reality, morality, and even human. People are left with no ultimate ontological ground, no reality, no ideal self, no meaning and no purpose. As a result, they begin to put consumption at the core of their life seeking for nothing both more than small additive pleasures through consumption. Rather than striving toward certain virtue, they aim to increase consumption and material possession to play multiple identities in their life like “soap man”. Indeed, consumption is a means to experience one’s different self. Post-modern thinkers argue that we are not ourselves, we play the “fictitious person” role portrayed by media. Increasing production of the media images creates a dream of world of lifestyles to experiment with. David Harris points to this issue in his book *A Society of Signs* (1996):

As the consumer market is flexible and more dynamic than older ways of regulating identities, much more fluidity is apparent: people can change their identities

more frequently, experiment with them, select more options from a cultural supermarket with far less commitment than before.

In the *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse argues that people are not free in free market capitalism; rather, they become slaves of their desires losing their real freedom. In his view, freedom of choosing is no different than freedom of choosing masters for slaves: “Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear- that is, if they sustain alienation. (Marcuse 1964, p.10). Tim Jackson (2009) describes consumer culture promoted by capitalism as “iron cage of consumerism”.

An increasing number of people engages in conspicuous consumption to regain their lost value in modern and post-modern era. A recent study shows that when one’s self-esteem is damaged, one is more likely to engage in luxury consumption to repair his image. In an experimental study, people were given simple tests. After completing the test, they were shown their scores compared to others who took the same test. Then, they were asked how much they would be willing to pay for luxury goods such as watches and cars. Interestingly, those who scored low compared to others were offering higher prices, meaning that they were giving higher value to high-status goods (Pettit and Sivanathan 2011). This means that when we feel that we are inferior to others, we are likely to engage in luxury consumption to close the gap. For that matter, perhaps, most TV shows work as commercial advertisements, urging people to engage in conspicuous consumption by making them feel inferior to the lavish actors.

In a consumer society, consumption is to some extent linked to personal and collective identity, confirming what was famously put by William James: “A man’s Self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes, his friends, his wife and children, his ancestors, his reputation and works, his lands and yacht and bank account...” (James 1950, p.291-292). The goods play a vital symbolic role in our lives in communicating

personal, social, and cultural messages (McCracken 1988).

In modern consumer society, individuals are in a continuous process of constructing their personal identity through consuming material goods as social and cultural symbols. Cushman (1990, 599-611) said that the “empty self” of a consumer is constantly in need of “filling up” through material consumption. Companies are quite successful in providing positional goods and services to conspicuous consumers. They do not sell “just” products; they sell brands, prestige, visions, dreams, associations, status, etc. (Klein 2001).

In short, the capitalist economic system which relies on the secular paradigm encourages people accumulate wealth and knowledge as means to for power, praise, and pleasure (satisfaction) (Aydin 2012b; Aydin 2012a). The system is successful in reaching almost everyone around the world because it relies on certain elements of human nature. As stated by Aydin (2013), “While the animal soul (*nafs*) desires pleasure, the power of anger (*quwwat al-ghadab*) wills to power, and the ego (*ananiyah*) wants to be praised.” The system promotes positional goods to satisfy animal desires and ego. It sets pursuing pleasure as the ultimate goal in life. “Even knowledge is a means for either wealth or ego-satisfying positions. Scientific and technological advancement are not for understanding truth or virtue, they are for power, praise, and pleasure” (Aydin 2013, 13).

*Tawhidi* paradigm could offer a solution to conspicuous consumption due to self-worth depletion with its different ontological, epistemological, anthropological, and teleological worldviews. Unlike the secular paradigm, in the *Tawhidi* paradigm, God is real and the source of all reality from moment to moment. Universal truth and complete knowledge is possible through the study of the words and works of God. We are not the product of evolution with no purpose in life. Rather, we are the khalifa of God with a great potential to even exceed all creature in the universe and become a friend to Him.

In the Islamic (moral) economic system which relies on the *Tawhidi* paradigm, it is not only permissible, but considered worship to work for a living, to obtain wealth and knowledge (Aydin 2012c).

However, unlike the capitalist system, they are not means for power, pleasure, and praise; they are means for truth and virtue. In other words, the pursuit of wealth is for performing virtuous actions while the pursuit of knowledge is to learn virtue and truth. In the following hadith, the Prophet (pbuh) clearly states that wealth and knowledge are just means: “*Envy is permitted only in two cases: A man whom Allah gives wealth, and he disposes of it rightfully, and a man to whom Allah gives knowledge which he applies and teaches*” [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]. The ultimate goal is not happiness, but excellence or perfection as a human being. It is to be a real human being who is portrayed in the Qur’an as being potentially superior to all creatures including angels. Therefore, the ultimate goal is to realize God’s human project as described in the Quran by rising the *insan-al kamil* (perfected human). Happiness is the by product of such an accomplishment.

Nursi argues that believers who are conscious of their innate value of being potentially the best of creation would not involve themselves in the consumption of positional goods and services. They would not seek value through material consumption and possession because they are created in the best form (*ashen-i tawim*) and destined to the highest of high (‘*ala illiyyun*). Positional goods and services are means to gain value (position) in the eyes of people. They are the means to satisfy the animal soul and ego at the cost of other residents of human nature. Someone is born to be the king of the entire creation would not waste his time to be a village head through wealth and consumption. For that matter, wealth and consumption is good only if they fulfill the function of helping people to disclose their potential and reach to advance toward the highest of high. While materialism attempts to fulfill sensual desires of human beings through conspicuous consumption, Nursi argues that Islam offers a happiness model through moderate material consumption, and spiritual, intellectual and moral nourishment.

Human value is not determined by our consumption, but by our verified belief in God (*iman-i billah*), knowledge of God (*ma’rifatullah*), and living a righteous life to show our love of God (*muhabbatullah*). Even though we are created in the best form, we

are warned that we could fall to the lowest of low if we do not follow the Divine guidance in controlling our animal soul (*nafs*), ego-boosting self (*ananiyah*), and oppressive ego (*quwwah ghadabiyah*). Once we follow the Qur'anic teaching and Sunnah of the Prophet, we could gain the highest value in the universe irrelevant to our material possession and worldly position. Therefore, engaging in conspicuous consumption to revalue ourselves is not needed once we truly understand and embrace the *Tawhidi* worldviews.

In a recent study, Aydin and Manusov (2012) conducted a comprehensive survey among a spiritual Muslim group to measure the level of their aspiration for material well-being and hedonic pleasure versus intellectual and spiritual pleasure. They designed the survey in a way to capture the values and goals of individuals within 14 different domains. This measurement allowed for the assessment of the relative centrality of particular goals/values within an individual's personal goal/value system. The study found that the more people involve themselves in spiritual activities the less they pursue materialist and hedonic goals. Similarly, the more they advance in spirituality, the more they become satisfied with their life.

Ironically, wealthy Muslim countries currently has a higher rate of conspicuous consumption compared to Western countries. As Aydin (Aydin 2014) states, the GCC becomes the hub of luxury consumption through its shopping malls and consumer culture. Riyadh, Dubai, and Doha are the target cities for the luxury goods market. We do not think that this fact negates our argument that the *Tawhidi* paradigm could reduce conspicuous consumption. This paradox might indicate the existence of the following problems in Muslim societies. First, many Muslims might not have real *tawhid*, in them. Second, they might not have the awareness of innate self-worth through *tawhid*. Third, they might follow lifestyles under the influence of the secular paradigm promoted by the mass media.

Finally, one might argue that the Islamic paradigm is similar to the Judeo-Christian one; therefore, it could not offer an alternative to the secular paradigm in terms of self-worth depletion. It is true that Islam has similar Judeo-Christian tradition in terms of its perceived human worth. Islam agrees that the human is created in the image of God's mercy. It further argues that the human is the *khalifa*

(representative) of God on the earth. However, Islam differs from the Judeo-Christian doctrine in several ways. First, Islam rejects the idea of being born with original sin. It perceives a new born as an innocent creature who is created in the best form. Second, Islam is free from contradiction when it comes to the pillar of faith. Third, Islam does not contradict with reason, rather establishes its foundation upon the verification of reason. Many verses in the Qur'an ask people to think and contemplate rather than blindly imitate. Fourth, Islamic knowledge does not contradict with real scientific knowledge because while the former is the words of God, the latter is His works.

### VIII. Concluding Remarks

Islamic economics provides the antidote for material indulgence and conspicuous consumption.<sup>1</sup> There are many verses of the Qur'an and hadiths of the Prophet (pbuh) warning believers against the danger of material indulgence. For instance, the Qur'an says, "O you who believe! Let not your wealth nor your children (distract and) divert you from the remembrance of God. Those who do so, they are the losers" (Qur'an, 63:9).

The Prophet also warns believers: "All things relating to man become old, but the desire to have long life and the passion of love of wealth always remain young." He also said, "If a man possesses gold the quantity equal to two valleys, he will be still greedy of a third valley. It is the dust alone that fills his belly" (Ghazali 2001, p.940).

Ghazali compares the attractive worldly life to an attractive, but cunning woman who tries to attract men to kill. Even though the woman is not worthy of love in reality, she would make herself

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<sup>1</sup> Islam is not against making money if it is not done at the cost of the human beings main mission in this life. Indeed, the Qur'an clearly states that believers should seek their share in this world as well: "Eat and drink of that which God has provided, and do not go about acting wickedly on earth, causing disorder and corruption." (Qur'an, 2:60) "And when the Prayer is done, then disperse in the land and seek (your portion) of God's bounty, and mention God much (both by doing the Prayer and on other occasions), so that you may prosper (in both worlds)." (Qur'an, 62:10) "But seek, by means of what God has granted you, the abode of the Hereafter (by spending in alms and other good causes), without forgetting your share (which God has appointed) in this world. ..." (Qur'an, 28:77).

attractive through covering “her face with an appealing veil, deck herself with gorgeous garments, decorate her profile in flamboyant fashion and put on rare invaluable jewelry so that whoever casts an eye on her, may fall in love with her immediately” (Ghazali, 2001:84).