

## Laws of Science, *Tabî'a'*, and the *Mânâ-yı Harfî*: Can There Be an Islamic Aristotelianism?

*Bilim Kanunları, Tabî'a ve Mânâ-yı Harfî: İslami Bir  
Aristotelesçilik Olabilir mi?*

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## Laws of Science, *Ṭabī'a'*, and the *Mânâ-yı Harfî*: Can There Be an Islamic Aristotelianism?

Edmund Michael LAZZARI

### Abstract

Recent works in the philosophy of science has led to a revival of Aristotelian approaches to the physical sciences. Historically, Aristotelian approaches to the sciences in the Islamic tradition have been opposed to God's working miracles in ways that do not conform to the laws of nature. This paper presents an approach from the thought of Said Nursi (1877-1960) and the thought of Thomas Aquinas (1226-1274) to show that an Aristotelian approach to causality in nature and God's miraculous action are not necessarily inherently opposed. First, this paper examines Said Nursi's *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective in order to show Nursi's reasoning for why the laws of nature are not inviolable. These arguments go hand-in-hand with Nursi's Ash'arite, occasionalistic denial of authentically created causality, the arguments for which will be briefly considered. The first part will also generate some criteria by which to judge an Aristotelian approach against that of a believer in God's miraculous action. In this paper, three criteria are posited to apply Nursi's *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective outside of his Ash'arite understanding of divine causality with respect to creatures. The first criterion is that creatures consist of a transparent sign to the divine (largely through teleology). The second is that any scientific or physical explanation of creatures without reference to God will always be radically incomplete, missing the most important metaphysical aspect of their relationship to God. The third is that, in reality, creatures are completely dependent upon God for all of their operations and without His constant action, they can do nothing. As a conclusion to the first part, Nursi's theology of the one Creator possessing the only causality is examined, placing a theological obstacle to creaturely causality: putatively sharing a divine attribute.

Next, the paper briefly puts the question of Aristotelian natures in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in the context of the medieval debate between al-Ghazālî and Ibn Rushd on whether the actions of nature occur with necessity or by the divine will. Then, the paper outlines an approach from the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas to suggest that the intimacy with which God is involved in the natural and miraculous action of the cosmos is sympathetic to Nursi's *mânâ-yı harfî*, even if the two approaches cannot be fully harmonized. Exploring St. Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of *esse* and the complete dependence of creatures on God's constant causality, this paper shows that creatures are incapable of doing anything by themselves apart from divine causality. This metaphysical dependence on God allows St. Thomas's thought to qualify for all three criteria of the *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective outside of the Ash'arite denial of creaturely causality.

The paper concludes by addressing two objections to this account. The first addresses possible confusion of creature and Creator in a participative metaphysics, which Nursi's position would imply, but is held by other figures like Mulla Sadra. The second objection is the question of human freedom and moral responsibility. The paper responds to the first objection by showing the clear and unequivocal distinction between the creature and the Creator. It responds to the second objection by pointing to both Nursi's Ash'arite response to the question of freedom and divine causation and St. Thomas Aquinas's solution to divine causality and human freedom to show that both are reasonable accounts of a heavily-involved God in the causality of creatures, achieving equivalent goals. Thus, this paper offers the beginning of a metaphysical alternative to Ash'arite metaphysics which nonetheless preserves God's intimate connection to creaturely action and God's miraculous action in the universe. While not claiming that both accounts can be reconciled, this paper addresses the similar concerns of both authors with different metaphysical commitments, showing that Nursi's arguments against autonomous creaturely causality and the larger debate about natures do not address St. Thomas Aquinas's transformed Aristotelianism, with the latter presenting a live option for non-Ash'arites sympathetic to the issues of divine involvement with the cosmos.

**Keywords:** Said Nursi, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, miracles, divine causality, *mânâ-yı harfî*

## Bilim Kanunları, Tabî'a ve Mânâ-yı Harfî: İslami Bir Aristotelesçilik Olabilir mi?

### Öz

Bilim felsefesindeki son çalışmalar, fizik bilimlerine yönelik Aristotelesçi yaklaşımların yeniden canlanmasına yol açmıştır. Tarihsel olarak, İslam geleneğinde bilimlere yönelik Aristotelesçi yaklaşımlar, Allah'ın doğa yasalarına uymayan şekillerde mucizeler yaratmasına karşı çıkmıştır. Bu makale, Said Nursi'nin (1877-1960) düşüncesinden ve Thomas Aquinas'ın (1226-1274) düşüncesinden bir yaklaşım sunarak, doğadaki nedenselliğe Aristotelesçi bir yaklaşım ile Allah'ın mucizevi eyleminin doğası gereği karşıt olmadığını göstermektedir. İlk olarak, bu makale Said Nursi'nin *doğa kanunlarının neden dokunulmaz olmadığına dair gerekçesini* göstermek için Said Nursi'nin *mânâ-yı harfî* perspektifini incelemektedir. Bu argümanlar, Nursi'nin Eş'ari, vesileci, otantik olarak yaratılmış nedenselliğin inkarı ile el ele gitmektedir ve bu argümanlar kısaca ele alınacaktır. İlk bölüm ayrıca, Allah'ın mucizevi eylemine inanan bir kişinin yaklaşımına karşı Aristotelesçi bir yaklaşımı yargılamak için bazı kriterler üretecektir. Bu makalede, Nursi'nin *mânâ-yı harfî* perspektifini, yaratıklara ilişkin Eş'ari ilahî nedensellik anlayışının dışında uygulamak için üç kriter ileri sürülmektedir. İlk kriter, yaratıkların ilahi olana (büyük ölçüde teleoloji yoluyla) şeffaf bir işaretten oluşmasıdır. İkincisi, Allah'a atıfta bulunmadan yaratıkların herhangi bir bilimsel ya da fiziksel açıklamasının her zaman radikal bir şekilde eksik olacağı ve Allah'la olan ilişkilerinin en önemli metafiziksel yönünü kaçıracağıdır. Üçüncüsü, gerçekte, yaratıkların tüm faaliyetleri için tamamen Allah'a bağımlı oldukları ve O'nun sürekli eylemi olmadan hiçbir şey yapamayacaklarıdır. İlk bölümün bir sonucu olarak, Nursi'nin tek nedenselliğe sahip tek Yaratıcı teolojisi, yaratılmış nedenselliğe teolojik bir engel koyarak incelenir: sözde ilahi bir sıfatı paylaşmak.

Daha sonra makale, St Thomas Aquinas'ın düşüncesindeki Aristotelesçi doğalar meselesini, Gazzâlî ve İbn Rüşd arasındaki, doğanın eylemlerinin zorunlulukla mı yoksa ilahi irade ile mi meydana geldiği konusundaki ortaçağ tartışması bağlamında kısaca ortaya koymaktadır. Daha sonra makale, Thomas Aquinas'ın metafiziğinden hareketle, Allah'ın kozmosun doğal ve mucizevi eylemine dahil olduğu yakınlığın, iki yaklaşım tam olarak uyumlaştırılmaması bile, Nursi'nin *mânâ-yı harfî* anlayışına sempatik geldiğini öne süren bir yaklaşımın ana hatlarını çizmektedir. St Thomas Aquinas'ın esse doktrinini ve yaratıkların Allah'ın sürekli nedenselliğine tam bağımlılığını inceleyen bu makale, yaratıkların ilahi nedensellik dışında kendi başlarına bir şey yapmaktan aciz olduklarını göstermektedir. Allah'a olan bu metafizik bağımlılık, St Thomas'ın düşüncesinin, Eş'ariliğin yaratılmış nedenselliği inkarının dışında, *mânâ-yı harfî* perspektifinin üç kriterine de uygun olmasını sağlar.

Makale, bu açıklamaya yönelik iki itirazı ele alarak sona ermektedir. Birincisi, Nursi'nin pozisyonunun ima ettiği, ancak Molla Sadra gibi diğer figürler tarafından savunulan katılımcı bir metafizikte yaratılan ve Yaratıcının olası karışıklığına değinmektedir. İkinci itiraz ise insan özgürlüğü ve ahlaki sorumluluk meselesidir. Bu makale, yaratılan ve Yaratıcı arasındaki açık ve kesin ayrımı göstererek ilk itiraza cevap vermektedir. İkinci itiraza, hem Nursi'nin özgürlük ve ilahi nedensellik sorusuna verdiği Eş'ari yanıtta hem de St Thomas Aquinas'ın ilahi nedensellik ve insan özgürlüğüne dair çözümüne işaret ederek, her ikisinin de yaratıkların nedenselliğine yoğun bir şekilde müdahil olan ve eşdeğer hedeflere ulaşan bir Allah'ın makul açıklamaları olduğunu göstererek yanıt vermektedir. Böylece bu makale, Eş'ari metafiziğine, Allah'ın yaratıkların eylemleriyle olan yakın ilişkisini ve Allah'ın evrendeki mucizevi eylemini koruyan metafiziksel bir alternatifin başlangıcını sunmaktadır. Her iki açıklamanın uzlaştırılabileceğini iddia etmemekle birlikte, bu makale, farklı metafizik taahhütlere sahip her iki yazarın benzer endişelerini ele alarak, Nursi'nin otonom yaratılmış nedenselliğe karşı argümanlarının ve doğalar hakkındaki daha geniş tartışmanın St Thomas Aquinas'ın dönüştürülmüş Aristotelesçiliğine hitap etmediğini ve ikincisinin Eş'ari olmayanlar için kozmosla ilahi müdahale meselelerine sempati duyan canlı bir seçenek sunduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Said Nursi, Aristoteles, Thomas Aquinas, mucizeler, ilahi nedensellik, *mânâ-yı harfî*

### 1. Introduction

The contemporary scientific method sees the regularity of the cosmos as a prerequisite for scientific experimentation, but at the same time has naturalistic presuppositions. The contemporary sciences are increasingly open to an understanding of creaturely causality framed in Aristotelian categories, including teleology and nature (the latter of which is translated *tabî'a* in the Arabic philosophical tradition).<sup>1</sup> These approaches, however, often assume the causally-

<sup>1</sup> William M. R. Simpson et al. (eds.), *Neo-Aristotelian Perspectives on Contemporary Science* (London: Routledge,

complete and -closed nature of the cosmos as displayed in what the Turkish intellectual Said Nursi (1877-1960) calls the *mânâ-yı ismî* [the meaning of the name], as opposed to a Quranic view of the universe, which he calls the *mânâ-yı harfî* [the meaning of the letter] (this terminology will be explained further below). An approach to the sciences that took advantage of the explanatory character of Aristotelian nature/*tabî'a*, but which also displayed the *mânâ-yı harfî*, would be a powerful union of scientific causality and theological meaning, helpful to scientifically-minded monotheists everywhere.

This paper will attempt to accomplish two things. First, it will provide a brief overview of Said Nursi's approach to miracles and laws of science in the *mânâ-yı harfî*, emphasizing some major aspects in which he claims that creaturely causality of nature/*tabî'a* is incompatible with the *mânâ-yı harfî*. This first section will show that, for Nursi, while the regularities of nature are caused by God, they are not absolute and inviolable.

The second part of this paper will be a presentation of theological speculation, which is presented as the beginning of a conversation in the theology of science between followers of Said Nursi and those of the Catholic Christian theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (1226-1274). In this second part, the paper attempts to explore whether there can be an approach to the incompleteness of creaturely causality in nature/*tabî'a* which is compatible with (or at least sympathetic to) Nursi's *mânâ-yı harfî*. Largely using the approach of St. Thomas Aquinas, this paper explores if such a position (central to Christianity) would be compatible with a generalized approach inspired by the *mânâ-yı harfî*, even if such a position would be denied by Nursi's larger thought on causality. If such an approach is possible and compatible with Islam, I wish to offer it as a metaphysical alternative to Nursi's Ash'arism for scientifically-minded Muslim theologians, enriching the metaphysical options for contemporary believers.

## 2. Novelty and Methodology

Authors have rarely placed Said Nursi in dialogue with Christian theology. Ozgur Koca has written an article suggesting that Nursi's occasionalistic theology of divine action can avoid some questions raised in the sciences by the (largely Christian) members of the Vatican Observatory-Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences collaborations commonly called the "Divine Action Project".<sup>2</sup> While Koca presents different occasionalist views of metaphysics and shows that they do not violate the sciences in ways that members of the Divine Action Project anticipate they would, this is less than a full engagement with Christian metaphysics. Nazif Muhtaroglu has written something close to this project, specifically comparing Nursi and St. Augustine on miracles, though he does not use the *mânâ-yı harfî* as his lens and does not engage with philosophical natures, reading both Nursi and St. Augustine as occasionalists.<sup>3</sup> This project here attempts to look at a non-occasionalist Christian metaphysics while still seeing whether such a metaphysics could meet the concerns that Nursi raises.

Several scholars have devoted attention to Nursi's *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective. Both Colin Turner and Necati Aydin have written at length about Nursi's perspectives and this paper will take their accounts as mutually beneficial and faithful to Nursi's thought.<sup>4</sup> The *mânâ-yı harfî*

2018).

<sup>2</sup> Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy, and William R. Stoeger (eds.), *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress* (Vatican City and Berkeley, CA: Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Nazif Muhtaroglu, "An Occasionalist Approach to Miracles", *Turkish Journal of Islamic Studies* 22 (2009): 71-93.

<sup>4</sup> See, Colin Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013); and Necati Aydin, *Said Nursi and Science in Islam: Character Building through Nursi's Mana-i Harfi* (London: Routledge, 2019). For Nursi's Quranic exegesis, see Ozgur Koca, "Said Nursi's (1876-1960) Analysis on the Exegetical Significance of the Divine Names Mentioned in the Qur'an", *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 14 (2015), <https://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/vol-14-no-2-november-2015-philosophy-and-theology/said-nursi-1876->

perspective is a rich way of engaging with the sciences through the lens of God's activity and these scholars argue that it is fundamental to Nursi's theology.

This paper summarizes Nursi's *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective with respect to creaturely causality and then abstract some fundamental aspects of it that would be potentially compatible with the Christian metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas, particularly through the lens of Aristotelian natures, a traditional target of Ash'arite thought. Through a critical exploration of some important primary texts of each theologian, this study will argue that St. Thomas Aquinas's transformed metaphysics in light of God avoids the traditional Ash'arite critique found in Nursi to the extent that his thought can be seen, in some extended way, as a Christian *mânâ-yı harfî*.

### 3. Said Nursi and the *Mânâ-yı Harfî* Perspective

Said Nursi, developing the Ash'arite school of Islamic theology, argued that creaturely causality is illusory. As is prominent in the first volume of the *Risale-i Nur*, the teleological ordering of the cosmos is a major aspect of Nursi's theology of divine action in the cosmos. For Nursi, this harmony of order is not only visible in the teleological pursuit of rational ends by unintelligent creatures or the cooperation of different causal chains with each other, but also in the regularity of operations in the universe. These observed regularities themselves provide a sign of God's ordering of the cosmos for the observer with *mânâ-yı harfî*.

Said Nursi uses the two terms *mânâ-yı ismî* and *mânâ-yı harfî* both to refer to two different aspects of reality and to refer to two different epistemological perspectives. The former term refers to the aspect of reality in which it seems that creatures act by their own powers without God's direct intervention. It is this aspect of reality that the sciences explore and is not problematic for Nursi unless it becomes a *perspective* in which the illusion of godless action is taken to be the reality of the situation. The latter term refers to the deeper aspect of reality where everything is completely open to and caused by God, with creatures acting as a mirror to God's greatness and glory. The perspective based on this reality is that of the Muslim believer or theologian seeing reality as it is, through Quranic enlightenment of sight, which banishes reductive materialism from one's perspective, even when one is performing scientific investigations.<sup>5</sup>

For my argument in this paper, Nursi's *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective is characterized as consisting of three aspects. The first is that creatures are seen as signs of divine meaning, largely through being teleologically ordered to God and displaying this to human beings (and/or *jinn*). The second is that any scientific or physical explanation of creatures without reference to God will always be radically incomplete, missing the most important metaphysical aspect of their relationship to God. The third is that, in reality, creatures are completely dependent upon God for all of their operations and without His constant action, they can do nothing. While these three aspects do not contain all of Nursi's statement or thought on the metaphysics of the universe, it is here suggested that they are the most central aspects of the *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective.

With this established, let us look at some dimensions of Nursi's understanding of "laws of nature" and causality. The words that Nursi uses most frequently and generically to describe a "law" is (in Arabic) *qānūn* and (in Ottoman) *kanun*. In the *Ishārāt al-Ijaz* (The Signs of Miraculousness), Nursi most frequently uses *qānūn/qawānīn* to refer to physical phenomena, such as "the law of gravity", "the laws of attraction and repulsion", and even "the laws of nature" (*qawānīn al-fitra*).<sup>6</sup> Nursi is quite explicit when he speaks about these laws as having a merely

[1960-analysis-on-the-exegetical-significance-of-the-divine-names-mentioned-in-the-quran/](#), accessed 24 January 2023; and Ozgur Koca, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an: The Contribution of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (London: Palgrave, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> See Aydin, *Said Nursi and Science*; and Said Nursi, *Meshnevî-i Nuriye* (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2012), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Said Nursi, *Ishārāt al-Ijaz* (Istanbul: Dār al-Nīl l-il-Tabā'a wa al-Nashr, 1987), 79 (verse 7), 146 (verses 21-22), and 143 (verses 21-22), respectively.

mental existence, with all true causality being dependent on the will of God.<sup>7</sup> When considering the regularities of nature in their reality, Nursi most often considers them the “habits of God” (*’ādāt/âdetini*), making all creaturely operations miraculous. Because all laws of nature do not actually exist in reality and are merely descriptions of the operations of God, there is no issue with God temporarily changing His action for a good purpose. What I would call “visible miracles” or “prophetic miracles”, for Nursi, are a deliberate suspension of the habits of God (*adāt-Allah*) to testify that He is supporting a prophet in the cosmos.<sup>8</sup> No metaphysical or theological contradiction occurs in such miracles because all creaturely action is directly caused by God already and are intended to be signs pointing to the divine. Prophetic miracles merely make the true structure of the cosmos even more clear than it is to the Muslim observer enlightened by the Qur’ān in the *mânâ-yı harfî*.

When attacking creaturely causality, Nursi’s work parallels that of al-Ghazālî in the denial of the necessity of creaturely natures in Aristotelian philosophy (*ṭabī’a*) to operate the ways God is accustomed to working them.<sup>9</sup> Nursi takes up al-Ghazālî’s denial of the necessity of creaturely causality and sharpens it into the denial of any creaturely causality. Nursi takes as his opponent and foil in all of these writings a materialistic scientist who represents the atheism of scientific positivism. Nursi constantly brings analogies forth to prove that creatures cannot operate on their own and that their normal operations are impossible without God causing them. Whether it is insisting that a notebook of plans governs the operations of a grand palace, that a chemical analysis exhausts the meaning of a Qur’ān, or even that a seed can make a fruit-producing plant, Nursi constantly paints the atheistic materialist as someone insisting on the absurdity of creatures acting far beyond their abilities.<sup>10</sup>

The problem with the scientific materialist, in Nursi’s portrayal, is that he insists that unintelligent matter can accomplish what only a supremely wise and powerful being could accomplish. The scientific materialist claims that the laws of nature (or even simply “nature” */ṭabī’a*) can cause the way the world is without needing God. God is completely excluded from creaturely causality and thus from the world altogether. For Nursi, the materialist is an atheist because he believes that creatures can act alone, without God. God is an unnecessary hypothesis for this scientific materialist and thus the exclusion of God from scientific explanation excludes God from creaturely causality.

From Nursi’s Quranic perspective, nothing could be further from the case. Because it is plainly impossible for creatures to accomplish the incredibly complex and extraordinary tasks we routinely see them accomplish, there must be a further cause behind what we see. Unless we attribute a miracle-worker to each and every action of creatures (since their actions, exceeding their abilities, are miraculous), the plain answer is that there is one great miracle-worker behind every action of creatures: God. At every moment, in every action, it is God causing creatures to act, not creatures causing themselves. Creaturely causality and nature are illusions meant to insulate God from claims of working evil by the unwise, but the one with true Qur’anic sight can understand that God causes everything that happens by his power. This total rejection of scientific materialism is a rejection of the belief that anything can happen without God causing it to happen. There is no causality without God’s causing it to happen and so the project of atheistic scientific

<sup>7</sup> Nursi, *Ishārāt al-Ijaz*, 146 (verses 21-22).

<sup>8</sup> Said Nursi, *Mektubat* (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 1996), 132-133 (115), On Dokuzuncu Mektup, İkinci Nükteli İşaret. This is paralleled by reasoning in Nursi, *Ishārāt al-I’jâz*, 142-143, Verses 21-22 and Nursi, *Ishārāt al-I’jâz*, 171-172, Verses 23-24

<sup>9</sup> Hans B. Wehr, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, s.v. “Definition علة (n.)” 4th ed., ed. J. M. Cowan (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 767.

<sup>10</sup> See Nursi, *Sözler*, 191-195 (143-145). On İkinci Söz, Birinci Esas and 389-416 (299-318) Yirmi İkinci Söz, İkinci Makam.

materialism is completely wrong.

Crucial for my purposes is that Nursi is dialoguing with the scientific materialism of the West, which has already left God far behind. The supposed autonomy of creatures in scientific materialism is the real target of Nursi's attack, crucially not Aristotelian natures as later interpreted by the Latin tradition, which very much does have God as a part of its metaphysics and (as will be shown below) does not insist on the autonomy of creatures apart from God's causality. While Nursi seems to treat the laws of nature and nature as the same in his critiques, this paper argues that this difference transforms an understanding of nature that will allow that approach to escape this metaphysical critique of creaturely causality.

Not only does Nursi deny the causative power of the laws of nature and therefore the metaphysical autonomy of creatures, but he also finds creatures participating in God's causality to be theologically incompatible with the absolute dominicality of God over the cosmos. From the Twenty-Second Word of the *Words*:

O heedless worshipper of causes! Causes are a veil [*Esbab bir perdedir*]; for Divine dignity and grandeur require them to be thus. But that which acts and performs matters is the power of the Eternally Besought One; for Divine unity [*tevhid/tawhîd*] and glory require it to be thus, and necessitate their independence [*istiklâli iktiza eder*]. The officials of the Pre-Eternal Monarch [*Sultan-ı Ezelînin*] are not executives of the sovereignty of dominicality [*Rububiyetin/rubûbiyyah*], they are the heralds [*dellâllarıdır*] of His sovereignty [*saltanatın*] and the observers and superintendents [*temâşâger nazırlarıdır*] of His dominicality. Their purpose is to make known the dignity of power and majesty of dominicality, so that power should not be seen to be associated with base and lowly matters. Not like a human king [*sultan*], tainted by impotence and indigence, who therefore takes officials as partners.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Nursi makes some striking claims about the incompatibility of *tabî'a* and causes and *tawhîd*. Causality and *tabî'a* are incompatible with Nursi's metaphysics inasmuch as they have real extramental existence separate from the divine power itself.<sup>12</sup> If they would have external powers, then this would, for Nursi, be akin to the Most High taking associating partners to His divine creative power, as shown through His operations in creation. Such an implication is completely incompatible with Islam and, as far as Nursi is concerned, is an inherent implication of creaturely causality and *tabî'a*. For Nursi, laws of nature and natures themselves can only exist as our way of thinking of God's action, otherwise, the most dire theological consequences result. The arrogation of God's creative power to creatures is the chief theological obstacle to any metaphysics of creaturely action in Islam.

#### 4. Divine Action and Aristotelianism

One of the most storied debates in the history of philosophy is between al-Ghazālî and Ibn Rushd about whether nature/*tabî'a* is inviolable by God. While *tabî'a* may not be scientifically demonstrated to be inviolable, Aristotle and the Greek Aristotelian tradition held that the actions of things by their natures (i.e. *tabî'a*) were actions they performed from necessity and were not changeable. Responding to al-Ghazālî in his own *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* [*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*], Ibn Rushd argues that such a metaphysical understanding of the universe as seen above in Nursi is absurd.<sup>13</sup> According to Ibn Rushd and the Aristotelian position, the regular actions of creatures in the cosmos are due to their natures, as self-evidently established by rational reflection. The habit of God in providentially guiding the universe is inviolable and He guides the

<sup>11</sup>Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur*, Vol. 1: *Sözler* (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2012), 390-391 (300-301) Yirmi İkinci Söz, İkinci Makam, Birinci Lem'a.

<sup>12</sup>Nursi, *Ishârât al-Ijaz*, 146 (verses 21-22).

<sup>13</sup>Ibn Rushd, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, trans. Simon van den Bergh (London: Luzac & Co., 1969), "On the Natural Sciences," <https://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ir/tt/>, accessed 8 August 2023.

universe through the connection between creatures' causes and creatures' effects. The Aristotelian analysis of creatures and their causality is self-evident and to oppose the findings of the philosophers on this issue is to contradict reason. There must be a natural cause to every unexpected effect, not the immediate action of God. It is clear from the above that al-Ghazālī's approach is a clear instance of Nursi's *mânâ-yı harfî*, while Ibn Rushd's position could be reasonably understood as representing the *mânâ-yı ismî*.

With some understanding of the stakes in this debate, the rest of the paper will outline a tentative and speculative approach preserves all three aspects of this characterization of the *mânâ-yı harfî perspective* (as opposed to the *mânâ-yı harfî* dimension of reality) while also keeping some understanding of Aristotelian natures, albeit in a transformed, theistic sense. This following account is one with which Nursi would (and in some sense did) ardently disagree and the following is not intended to be taken as an interpretation of Nursi. This paper does intend, however, to take the three aspects of the *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective and show how this transformed Aristotelianism is consistent with this approach. While this approach is broadly representative of metaphysics in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, finds a chief expositor in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.

In Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, all things are created by God and have God as their final end, the first requirement of the *mânâ-yı harfî*. Their purpose in this world is to give glory to God by their existence and operations and to show that glory to intellectual creatures, i.e. angels and human beings. As Psalm 19 states: "The heavens declare the glory of God/the firmament tells forth the work of His hands".<sup>14</sup>

In the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, every created being strives toward God as the ultimate good as they strive to continue to exist and flourish.<sup>15</sup> God is the final cause of the universe and this is seen in every aspect of the universe, from cosmology to biology in every creature tending toward its good.<sup>16</sup> Human beings find in themselves an inextricable tendency toward the good and God is the ultimate good without which they will never be satisfied.<sup>17</sup> All creation is teleologically ordered to God and this aspect is transparent in the activity of all creatures.

The second criterion of the *mânâ-yı harfî*, complete metaphysical dependence on God for creaturely operations, at first seems to be contradictory to any use of Aristotelian *tabî'a*, as Nursi held. For St. Thomas Aquinas, creatures do have a kind of authentic causality as creatures and can cause real metaphysical changes in the world through their metaphysical constitution. St. Thomas holds the fourfold Aristotelian structure of causality to be self-evident through reflection on sense information and that one can analyze the universe in some ways without explicit reference to the Creator. The existence of God is a genuine intellectual discovery in the metaphysical thought of St. Thomas Aquinas and it is not self-evident to all human beings living in the world. The Aristotelian character of causality pervades even St. Thomas's approach to Christian theology, analyzing the Incarnation and sacraments through Aristotelian hylomorphic terms.

The similarity to Ibn Rushd's Aristotelianism, however, is only superficial when it comes to the most important and deepest aspects of St. Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics of divine and creaturely action. While creation exists to render glory and worship to God, the relationship of creatures to their Creator is also one that constitutes the core of their metaphysical constitution. While there are genuine creaturely structures of causality and while there are some domains in which explicit reference to God is not necessary, these approaches are radically incomplete in the

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 19:2, Translation based on the Grail Psalter.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Critical ed. Institutii Studiorum Medievalium Ottaviensis (Ottawa: Commissio Piana, 1953), 1/23a-26b, 30b-32a, Question 4 and 5, article 5. Henceforth, ST I, Q. 4, Q. 5, art. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2/1224b-1228a, ST I-II, Q. 94, art. 2c.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2/710a-751b, ST I-II QQ. 1-5.



thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. Whenever one approaches creatures, there will be limits and puzzles to the actions of creatures if one does not come to the knowledge of the existence of a supremely good Creator, fulfilling the second criterion of the *mânâ-yî harfî*.

In his largest transformation of the Aristotelian system, St. Thomas adds *esse* (or existence) as a principle to Aristotelian metaphysics, showing his conformity to the third aspect of the *mânâ-yî harfî*. *Esse* is at the core of each creature's actuality, not only in its existence, but also in moving every subsequent aspect and action of a creature from mere potency into act. While a substance's potency is dependent upon its essential structure as a form-matter composite, the actualizing of this structure at its most fundamental level and all subsequent levels depends on the *esse*.<sup>18</sup> Because *esse* is that which actualizes the rest of the human being, St. Thomas calls it the "act of all acts and perfection of all perfections".<sup>19</sup>

Creatures' *esse*, however, cannot come from creatures themselves. Because the bestowal of *esse* on a creature is itself an act of creation *ex nihilo*, only God can bestow *esse* on a creature.<sup>20</sup> Since this *esse* is not a part of any finite creature's *ṭabî'a*, it comes to the creature from outside while at the same time being the core of the creature's every actuality. Because creatures need this bestowal of *esse* for their every actuality, every moment of their existence requires this continual divine act of creation and the corresponding participation of creatures in God as an effect in cause. *Ṭabî'a* is completely dependent upon God actualizing it with *esse*.

This last paragraph is absolutely indispensable to my argument. While St Thomas believes that there are real causal metaphysical structures in creatures, none of them can do anything without being actualized by the creature's *esse* which is constantly being given and actualized by God. God is constantly causing the actuality of creatures and moving their causal powers to act in accord with their finite natures.<sup>21</sup> In other words, in St. Thomas's understanding, a creature only acts by its nature *because God is constantly creating and actualizing it to do so*. There is no possible autonomy apart from God and no domain of action which God is not constantly supplying the causality and actuality for. If God did not, then it would not exist or act at all.

The paradox of creation is that *esse* is both intimately necessary for every actuality of creatures and that its source is external to the creature, over which the creature has no control. *Esse* in creatures is the way God is, in the words of St. Augustine, "interior intimo meo et superior summo meo",<sup>22</sup> closer than my innermost being and higher than my highest self. The source of creaturely existence is both immanent by his power as cause to creaturely existence and transcendent by his complete unlimited actuality and existence external to any creature's essence.

Thus, all creatures depend on God for their every action, but, because this action takes place in and through their created natures, that makes the God-caused action in creatures simultaneously real causality that properly belongs to creatures while constantly being given by God. The actuality that God gives them is real, though it is not something they can create or sustain of their own accord. The *ṭabî'a* and actions of creatures really affect the world, but not one moment of creaturely action is possible without God moving it to act.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de anima*, Critical ed. Leonine Commission (Rome-Paris, Commissio Leonina, 1996), <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~QDePot>, Q. 12, corpus, ad 16; Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de potentia Dei*, Critical ed. Roberto Busa (Rome: Marietti, 1965), <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~QDePot>, Q. 3, art 8c, ad 19, ad 20.

<sup>19</sup> Aquinas, *De Potentia*, Q. 7, art. 2, ad 9.

<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, *De Potentia*, Q. 3, art 4c; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Critical ed. Leonine Commission (Manualis) (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1934), 100-101, 106-107, Bk. II, cc. 15, 21; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1/287b-289a, ST I, Q. 45, art. 5c.

<sup>21</sup> See Aquinas, *De Potentia*, Q. 3, art 7c and Ignacio Silva, "Thomas Aquinas Holds Fast: Objections to Aquinas in Today's Debate on Divine Action", *Heythrop Journal* 54 (2013): 664.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*, Critical ed. James J. O'Donnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.6.11.

St. Thomas calls the action of God moving the creature to act “primary causality” and the actions of creatures “secondary” or “instrumental causality”.<sup>23</sup> Often using the analogy of a man cutting wood with an ax, St. Thomas states that creatures do have real causality, just as ax is really cutting the wood, but that creatures are powerless to act by themselves, as the ax is powerless to act without being moved and used constantly by the man. For St. Thomas, everything about creatures is actualized by their *esse* and there is nothing in creatures that does not depend upon their *esse* for actuality.<sup>24</sup> God directly creates, sustains, moves to act, and applies *esse* in creatures, so that every action of their *tabī’a* is dependent upon the constant creative action of God, which is inimitable and irreplaceable.<sup>25</sup>

The thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, therefore, radically reinterprets Aristotelian natures in light of his doctrine of *esse* created by God and avoids the restrictions on divine action placed by Ibn Rushd’s understandings of the metaphysics of divine action. While not an Ash’arite view and having many things that are perhaps objectionable to it, St. Thomas Aquinas holds a position of real creaturely action that is nonetheless totally dependent on the continuous gratuitous bestowal of actuality on creatures by God. The teleological tendency of all things to God and the metaphysical dependence of all things on God, may be sufficient to characterize St. Thomas’s theistic metaphysics as a kind of Christian *mânâ-yı harfî*, which nonetheless preserves some of the methodology of the contemporary sciences. While the latter must be understood as limited and incomplete studies of creaturely *tabī’a*, such studies can use Aristotelian *tabī’a* as a helpful lens in the physical sciences that accurately but incompletely describe creaturely action in the world.

Two clarifying objections can be raised here, one from a Nursian perspective and one from a general perspective. From a Nursian perspective, how can creatures have causality of their own without compromising the absolute dominicality of God over creatures? Does not giving creatures some causality cause association with the powers of the Creator?

This first objection is something that cannot be fully overcome so long as one is in a strictly Nursian/Ash’arite perspective. If any kind of causality is only the exclusive domain of the Creator, then any creaturely causality would be a kind of association. Indeed, the Christian tradition is fond of the Platonic language of “participation” to describe the relationship between the creature and the Creator.<sup>26</sup> This is not intended to imply that Nursi would agree with St. Thomas’s account of causality.<sup>27</sup>

On a deeper level, however, there is a vast gulf between participated creaturely causality and the infinite source of existence that is divine causality. Whatever limited actions and effects creatures have in the universe, they are neither the source nor the authors of those actions and effects. For St. Thomas, the difference between the creature’s limited causality and the Creator’s infinite creative causality is so vast that the word “causality” is not even being used in the same sense. Rather, our observations of creaturely action lead us to use the term “causality” as an analogy for God’s creating and actualizing power.<sup>28</sup> Only God can create out of nothing and only God can provide the actuality that powers everything that acts; any actuality of creatures is a borrowed actuality that is a pale imitation of the ultimate source of all. There is sufficient difference between the creature and the Creator in this understanding that there is no danger of

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 4/2822a-2822b, ST III, Q. 62, art 1, ad 2; Aquina, *De Potentia*, Q. 3, art. 7c; Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 305-306, Bk. III c. 70.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., ST III, Q. 62, art 1, ad 2.

<sup>25</sup> See note 17.

<sup>26</sup> See 2 Peter 1:4 and Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Though, as other Islamic theologians like Molla Sadra also use participative accounts to explain creaturely existence, this is not necessarily an objection that holds for all Islamic theology.

<sup>28</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 30-35, Bk. 1, cc. 29-34.

confusing the creature with the Creator.

The second objection comes from a broader perspective. If both Nursi and St. Thomas hold that God causes every action, how can there be true human freedom and responsibility, without which ethics is impossible? While here is not the place to give a full account of either thinker, this objection illustrates the difference between their metaphysical thought. For Nursi, human intentions are something that we freely have and when we intend to perform an action, God honors our intention and performs the action, attributing responsibility to the human being as “acquired” by the human being from God’s honoring the action.<sup>29</sup> Thus, we are free to carry out our intentions, thanks to God’s action. For, St. Thomas, God provides the actuality for every creaturely power and action in accord with that creature’s nature and character. Since it is the character of human nature to have finite intellect and the power of deliberation to choose actions freely, God provides the actuality by which human beings choose and direct their action according to their chosen ends.<sup>30</sup> While they could not choose anything without God supplying the ability and actuality, human beings are free to direct this choice to different activities and ends, which God supplies the actuality for them to carry out after the choice, which is carried out through the finite causality and nature of the human being.

Both accounts place human freedom in God’s hands and require that God’s actuality be active in human decision-making. As for Nursi God allows action to be “acquired” by human beings, so in St. Thomas’s account, all creatures, not just humans, act in their finite natures by the actuality God gives them according to what they are. While sub-human creatures like animals, plants, and rocks, lack freedom and responsibility, God still actualizes and causes them according to their natures and characters, making the action of a plant truly the action of a plant caused by God, though without freedom. God causes all things to act according to their natures (except in miraculous action), but nothing creatures do can happen without God causing it. Because human beings are the kinds of creatures with free will, their divinely-created willing choose the ends they freely choose in accord with their nature.

## 5. Conclusion

In sum, while the accounts of Said Nursi and St. Thomas Aquinas are not mutually -reconcilable, it is here argued that St. Thomas’s metaphysics of divine and creaturely action can be compatible with the three criteria of the *mânâ-yı harfî* perspective, always keeping in mind that God causes all creaturely action and that any analysis of creatures without God is at best incomplete and at worst actively misleading. For Muslim theologians not fully comfortable with the complete denial of creaturely causality, but who would also like to avoid positions of creatures being autonomous from God’s causality, this paper proposes that the metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas contains rich resources for further thought on a reinterpreted nature completely dependent on God.

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<sup>29</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 623-646 (477-494).

<sup>30</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 308-310, Bk. III, cc. 72-73.

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