



Augustinian Miracles: An Alternative to Prevailing Orthodoxies?

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This article explores Augustine of Hippo's conception of miracles. It places a particular emphasis on the metaphysics of the natural order in Augustine's works *The Trinity* and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* to dispute subjectivist and interventionist readings of Augustinian miracles. Rather, this article argues that Augustine offers a metaphysically robust conception of miracles that upholds an intimate connection between God and nature while respecting the intrinsic wonder of miracles. In light of this, this article considers how a deep and wide engagement with Augustine's thought may help provide alternative approaches to the prevailing philosophical and theological orthodoxies regarding miracles.



Historical analysis has served as a powerful tool in the field of science and religion. A deep engagement with the historical relationship between science and religion has helped undermine the narrative, which has been so pervasive since the nineteenth century, that science and religion are in perpetual conflict. The historical work by figures such as John Hedley Brooke and Peter Harrison has highlighted the complex, multifaceted relationship between science and religion.¹ As the field of science and religion has matured, moving beyond solely looking at the general relationship between the global categories of “science” and “religion” and examining more finely grained questions about specific areas of science and religion, the value of a deep historical engagement must not be forgotten.²

Harrison (2023, 99) emphasizes this point, arguing that knowledge of the historical relationship between science and religion informs and enriches contemporary discussion in the field. It helps one to better recognize that many of the problems faced in the science and religion dialogue are contingent upon the mode of engagement one adopts between the disciplines and that the adoption of a different mode of engagement may resolve, dissolve, or alleviate these problems. Furthermore, a historical analysis will provide insight into various modes of engagement that may not have been available to the science-and-religion scholar’s eyes if they had been exclusively focused on the present. This insight, therefore, provides new tools to tackle the current issues and topics within the field of science and religion.

In this article, I aim to show how a deep historical engagement with Augustine’s thought on miracles may enhance the contemporary discussion regarding the nature of miracles. To achieve this, in the first section, I examine the state of the contemporary discussion regarding the nature of miracles, highlighting the key challenges with the prevailing interventionist approach, and outline how this discussion may benefit from deeper historical engagement, specifically with the thought of Augustine. In the second section, I analyze Augustine’s writings on miracles, placing a particular emphasis on the God–nature relationship assumed in Augustine’s account of miracles. In turn, I argue that Augustine proposes a more metaphysically robust conception of miracles than he is typically given credit for. In section three, I outline various ways Augustine’s thought on miracles may contribute to the contemporary discussion regarding the nature of miracles. In particular, I argue that Augustine’s thought can help develop an alternative approach to miracles that relies on more theologically appealing conceptions of the God–nature relationship and divine intervention compared to the prevailing interventionist approach.

The Contemporary Discussion of the Nature of Miracles

The scholarship regarding the question “what is a miracle?” is in a state of flux. In much contemporary discussion, an interventionist understanding of miracles has been paradigmatic. In this approach, miracles are understood as occurring

through God's intervention in nature and violation of its laws. Eminent philosopher Charles Taylor (2007, 547) expresses this thought, describing the "modern concept of 'miracle'" as being "a kind of punctual hole blown in the regular order of things from outside, that is, from the transcendent." Such a conception of miracles sees nature as a self-sufficient entity, the boundaries of which God must pierce through and intervene to cause miracles.

An illustrative example of this interventionist approach can be found in John Leslie Mackie's (1982) description of miracles in *The Miracle of Theism*. In this work, Mackie (1982, 20) writes that "a miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it." Building upon this idea, he speaks of "the notion of the natural world in contrast with which the theistic doctrines stand out as asserting a supernatural reality" (Mackie 1982, 13). The natural world is self-sufficient, running by itself, where "everything that happens results from factors within that system in accordance with its laws of working" (Mackie 1982, 21). A miracle then occurs through "a supernatural intervention . . . into that system from outside the natural world as a whole" (Mackie 1982, 21).

Despite the prevalence of understanding miracles as God intervening in nature, this approach is plagued with difficulties. For instance, John Macquarrie (1966, 248) argues that an interventionist understanding of miracles "cannot commend itself in a post-mythological climate of thought" because it is irreconcilable with modern science. He supports the perspective that science relies on the worldview that the universe is a causally closed system that runs according to the laws of nature. Since interventionist miracles stand in direct contrast to this worldview, requiring God to violate the laws of nature, they are contrary to modern science.

Key participants in the Divine Action Project (DAP), 1988–2003, the most influential and systematic examination of special divine action in recent times, raised more theologically focused objections. Many members of the DAP were worried that God intervening in the natural order and violating the laws of nature may entail an inconsistency in the nature of God. Robert Russell (2009, 354), a key figurehead of the DAP, writes: "[T]his approach [i.e., interventionism] is theologically problematic because it pits God's special acts against God's regular action, the latter of which is seen to be the underlying cause of nature's regularities."

Expressing the general view of participants in the DAP, Wesley Wildman (2008, 141) states:

The DAP project tried to be sensitive to issues of theological consistency. For example, the idea of God sustaining nature and its law-like regularities with one hand while miraculously intervening, abrogating, or ignoring those regularities with the other hand struck most members as dangerously close to outright contradiction.

More generally, it has been contended that the idea of God intervening in nature relies on a theologically impoverished conception of God's relation to nature. Andrew Davison (2019, 232) develops this objection, writing:

[The language of intervention] accords too great a degree of independence to creation, as if it stood over and against God in such a way that he would need to find a way to enter into it. If the whole of creation's being already derives from God at every moment, God does not need some special means . . . in order to act, given that every action, in every case, already proceeds on account of God's action.

In a similar vein, E. L. Mascall (1971, 151) writes that the idea of God intervening in nature entails a relation between the natural and the supernatural where "the two orders [i.e., the natural and the supernatural] are thought of rather as if they were two apartments on adjacent floors, with a layer of soundproof packing between the natural ceiling below and the supernatural floor above."

This conception of the natural and the supernatural is inadequate because it undermines both the immanence and transcendence of God. God's transcendence is undermined because God exists in the same way that natural things exist, it is just that God exists in the "supernatural apartment" while natural things exist in the "natural apartment." In a sense, God is reduced and confined to the supernatural apartment. This undermines the immanence of God, because God is expelled from the natural world, existing in a supernatural realm extrinsic or added to a complete nature that exists in and of itself.

In light of these challenges for interventionism, alternative accounts of miracles and divine action have been formulated. For instance, a central contribution of the DAP was the systematic development of the non-interventionist objective divine action (NIODA) approach. This approach argues that there are pockets of ontological indeterminism in the natural order that allow God to objectively act within the world without intervening in nature.³ Alternatively, theistic naturalist approaches hold that all of the natural order is inherently involved with God's active presence, meaning God can act in the world exclusively through secondary causes.⁴ Thirdly, neo-Thomist approaches argue that a Thomistic framework provides a strong theological foundation for understanding divine action and can be developed to be compatible with modern science.⁵

It is not the aim of this article to systematically examine these alternative approaches to miracles and divine action. I merely want to point out that the contemporary discussion regarding the nature of miracles and divine action is at an exciting point; the prevailing interventionist approach largely has been dismissed and new alternatives are being offered.⁶ In this article, I aim to show

how a deep historical engagement with Augustine's thought on miracles may benefit this contemporary discussion.

First, a more general point: Why may historical engagement benefit contemporary scholarship regarding the nature of miracles? As highlighted, a key issue with the interventionist approach is that it relies on an inadequate God–nature relationship, where nature exists apart from God in a self-sufficient bubble such that God must intervene in the world in order to act.⁷ Alister McGrath (2015, 10) proposes that this God–nature relationship is largely a product of modern sensibilities. Thus, studying the thought of pre-modern theologians may offer alternative ways of understanding the relationship between God and nature that are more theologically palatable.⁸

Next, why engage more specifically with the thought of Augustine on miracles? John Hardon (1954, 230) writes that Augustine “formulated the first theological definition of *miraculum*.” Similarly, Harrison (1995, 533) considers Augustine “the first to attempt a formal definition of ‘miracle’.” Furthermore, Augustine's thought heavily influenced subsequent scholastic thought on miracles. Lydia Schumacher (2022, 3) writes that “in the medieval period, Augustine's ideas were formulated in new ways by Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109), Peter Lombard (1100–60), Albert the Great (d. 1280), and Thomas Aquinas (1225–74).” Due to the historical influence of Augustine's thought on miracles, it seems apt that we should engage with his writings in contemporary times.

Second, as I argue in the next section, contemporary scholarly engagement with Augustine's writings on miracles has typically focused on a particular strand of Augustine's thought. While this strand is helpful, I argue that it does not do justice to the full richness of Augustine's writings on miracles. Thus, I do not think the full contributions Augustine's thought on miracles may have to the contemporary discussion have been sufficiently appreciated. It is the aim of this article to explore how a deep engagement with Augustine's thought may offer alternative and fruitful ways of approaching the question of what a miracle is.

With this in mind, in the next section, I seek to engage with Augustine's thought on miracles on its own terms, placing a particular emphasis on the God–nature relationship assumed in Augustine's account of miracles. Then, in the third and final section, I seek to outline how Augustine's thought on miracles may benefit the contemporary discussion of miracles and respond to key challenges with this endeavor.

Augustine's Metaphysics of Nature and Miracles

Augustine's discussion of the nature of miracles primarily arises in two contexts. First, he focuses on the theological significance of miracles. Second, he seeks to demonstrate the occurrence of miracles, including contemporary miracles attested to by himself and other believers.

Regarding the first of these contexts, Augustine sees the main role of miracles to be to instill faith in others. Miracles are exemplifications of God's divine power and serve as signs for truths about God. Speaking of miracles such as the rod of Moses turning into a serpent (Exodus 4:3) and Jesus turning water into wine (John 4), Augustine holds that these events could only have occurred through divine power. Indeed, the inherently wondrous nature of miracles serves to persuade even the foolish of God's divine power, although they fail to recognize that all events are ultimately exemplifications of God's power (Augustine 1991, 3.1.11).

Augustine primarily focuses on the miracles performed by Jesus and his apostles. He holds that these miracles vitalize people's faith in Christ. For example, in *The Usefulness of Belief*, Augustine (2006, 32) writes: "What was the purpose of so many great miracles? He [Christ] said himself that they were done for no other purpose than that men should believe in him." This theme runs throughout Augustine's discussions on miracles. In *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (hereafter, *City of God*), Augustine (2003, 22.6) discusses "all those great miracles" performed by Jesus, his apostles, and those with faith in Christ who persuade individuals that Christ was God.

With Augustine's view that the miracles of Christ and his followers justify the Christian faith, in Book XXII of *City of God*, he argues extensively for the occurrence of certain miracles witnessed by himself and other contemporaries. Augustine speaks of seeing a blind man being restored to sight in Milan at the location of the remains of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius. He claims to have seen with his brother Alypius the miraculous healing of Innocentius at Carthage. Alongside these two events, Augustine speaks of twenty-one other miracles he claims to know for certain happened in his time.

Augustine's Subjective Definition of "Miracle"

Discussions of Augustine on miracles often give central focus to his definition offered in *The Usefulness of Belief* (Hardon 1954, 230; Harrison 1995, 533). In this early work, Augustine (2006, 34) defines a miracle as "something strange and difficult which exceeds the expectation and capacity of him who marvels at it." Here, Augustine offers a subjective account of miracles; nothing intrinsic to the event determines whether it is or is not a miracle (Harrison 1995, 533). Rather, whether an event is miraculous depends entirely on how the subject understands the event and, in particular, whether the event appears unusual to them.

Building upon this thought, Augustine suggests that every event should be considered miraculous because, in a sense, every event is unusual. He writes:

God's daily miracles were disesteemed, not for their easiness but their constant repetition . . . When the water was made wine, men saw it and were amazed;

what else takes place with the rain along the root of the vine? He did the one, He does the other. (Mourant 1973, 104)

More briefly, Augustine writes: “Is not the daily course of nature itself something to be amazed at? All things are full of miracles, but our wonder is lessened by their repetition” (Mourant 1973, 104). Here, Augustine seems to be using “unusual” in a rather unique way. For Augustine, “unusual” does not refer to events that rarely happen, since he speaks of “daily miracles” and miracles whose wonder is lessened by repetition.

Instead, “unusual” for Augustine refers to the radical contingency of all events. One of the claims Augustine seems to be making is that nothing in nature occurs through fate or necessity—as supposed by the Stoics—but rather everything occurs through the will of God (Grant 1952, 219). Emphasizing this point, Augustine (1982, 5.21) references Matthew 10:29, writing: “Our Savior with His own lips tells us that not a single sparrow falls to earth without God willing it, and that God Himself clothes the grass of the field, which soon is to be thrown into the oven.”

Since every event occurs through the will of God, every event can be understood as a sign of God’s providence. In the same way that Jesus turning water into wine is so unusual and wonderful that it must be a sign of God’s providence, Augustine suggests that the development of wine through its natural process is also so unusual and wonderful that it must be a sign of God’s providence. It is just that our wonder at the natural development of wine is lessened by its constant repetition.

In these quotations, Augustine is proposing a conception of miracles that is radically different from the interventionist approach prominent in modern thought. First, he offers a conception of miracles that is subjective. What makes an event a miracle is not any metaphysical feature of the event itself—such as whether it is caused by a divine intervention or breaks the laws of nature—but rather whether an individual finds the event unusual. Second, he proposes that every event ought to be understood as a miracle because every event is “unusual” in the sense that every event occurs not by necessity but through the will of God. Third, whereas interventionist accounts of miracles rely on a conception of nature as existing self-sufficiently apart from God, Augustine emphasizes that nature is inextricably connected to and dependent upon God.

One question that may arise from this discussion of Augustine’s conception of miracles is whether he pays due respect to the unique category of miracles. By affirming the miraculousness of every event, it seems Augustine does not conceive there to be a unique category of miracles that stands in contrast to natural events; Jesus turning water into wine and feeding the five thousand seem to be of the same metaphysical status as wine being made through fermenting grapes and a piece of bread nourishing one person. If there is no such unique

category of miracles, there may be a concern that the theological significance of miracles is undermined. John Mourant (1973, 105) expresses this view, writing: “Obviously the wondrous can have meaning only in contrast to that which is non-wondrous. Without the ordinary repetition of events in nature there could not appear the extraordinary which distinguishes the miraculous.”

While certain scholars have understood Augustine as denying a unique category of miracles, upholding every event to be miraculous, I think limiting Augustine’s understanding of miracles to this interpretation inadequately reflects the depth of his thought on miracles.⁹ Augustine used the term *miraculum* in various ways (Hardon 1954, 230). In the way considered here, he emphasizes the unusualness and wonderful nature of all events. However, in *The Trinity* and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine offers a more metaphysically robust conception of miracles that upholds the unique category of miracles and contrasts them with natural events. It is this more metaphysically robust conception of miracles offered by Augustine I focus on for the remainder of this section and which I think can be particularly useful for offering an alternative to prevailing orthodoxies in the contemporary discussion of miracles.

Augustine’s Metaphysics of the Natural Order

To gain greater insight into Augustine’s more metaphysically robust conception of miracles, it will help to first understand what Augustine means by “the natural order.” In *The Trinity*, Augustine (1991, 3.3.19) recognizes that events within the usual course of nature occur at “frequent intervals.” Such events include the rising and setting of stars, the generations and deaths of animals, the snow and rain, the lightning and thunder, cold and heat, and other like things.

Indeed, even rarer events such as “eclipses and comets and earthquakes and monstrous births and similar things” belong to the usual course of nature (Augustine 1991, 3.1.7). Although, *prima facie*, they are unusual and wondrous, a deeper inquiry into these events shows they are “often repeated and known over several generations and known to more and more educated people” (Augustine 1991, 3.1.7). Here, Augustine seems to suggest that a deeper knowledge of these events allows one to recognize that they occur in a regular, albeit infrequent, fashion that can be predicted. Augustine considers events belonging to the usual course of nature to be natural events. He writes: “[W]hen these things happen in the continuous flow and flux of things, traveling the usual road from darkness into light, and from the light back into the darkness, they are called natural” (Augustine 1991, 3.1.11).

For Augustine, there is a metaphysics that underpins whether events belong to the usual course of nature. While today we typically conceptualize the regularities of nature in terms of the laws of nature, Augustine drew upon the Stoic idea of seminal reasons (*rationes seminales*) deployed by the Neoplatonists

(Oliver 2016, 387).¹⁰ Augustine introduces the idea of seminal reasons in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* to tackle two related problems.

First, there is the issue of repetition in the first two chapters of Genesis. Augustine wonders why we are told in the first chapter what God created on the various days of creation and then again in second chapter told that God brought forth from the ground the trees, the birds, and the animals (Brady 1964, 142). Second, Augustine considers the issue of how creation was complete on the seventh day while we still see the production and reproduction of new life in current times (Mourant 1973, 113).

To tackle these questions, Augustine (1982, 9.17) supposes that in the act of creation, God endowed creaturely entities with seminal reasons that determine “for each thing what it can do or not do and what can be done or not done with it.”¹¹ He compares these seminal reasons to seeds concealed within corporal elements that require “suitable combinations of circumstances” for “particular species to burst into being and carry on their career” (Augustine 1991, 3.2.13). The world, like mothers heavy with young, “is heavy with the causes of things that are coming to birth” (Augustine 1991, 3.2.16).

Mariusz Tabaczek (2020, 952) describes each seminal reason as “a very specific type of potentiality of a particular and fixed type of entity or natural kind.” Within each creature is a particular potentiality that is actualized given particular circumstances. For instance, within the acorn is the potentiality for becoming an oak tree, given the acorn is provided with the right conditions. The seminal reason within a natural creature serves as “a sort of secondary efficient cause of the development of the living being” that accounts for the creature having its particular nature and powers (Brady 1964, 156).

Augustine seeks to resolve these two challenges in light of his theory of seminal reasons. Augustine denies that there is repetition in the first two chapters of Genesis because the first chapter speaks of God implanting the seminal reasons within the natural order and the second chapter speaks of how the seminal reasons led to the development of visible living beings (Brady 1964, 143). On the question of whether creation was complete on the seventh day, Augustine answers that creation was complete on the seventh day in the sense that all seminal reasons were implanted in the created order, but the development and reproduction of new life occurs today as these seminal reasons still lead to new life (Mourant 1973, 113).

Augustine’s theory of seminal reasons also serves as a metaphysical basis for the order of nature. Creaturely entities are endowed with a given seminal reason that governs the development of that creature. Provided the particular circumstances are met, the creature will develop into its particular nature with its particular set of powers. Thus, the natural order occurs in a regular and predictable way because each seminal reason endowed in each creaturely entity ensures that the development of that entity is uniform.

There has been much debate regarding the metaphysical status of seminal reasons, particularly whether seminal reasons are intrinsic or extrinsic to corporeal entities. Simon Oliver (2016, 379) notes that Augustine's account of seminal reasons has faced charges from two sides. He has been accused of rendering seminal reasons as external to corporeal entities, i.e., not existing within corporeal entities but rather only in the mind of God. This entails that corporeal entities are innately powerless, completely passive like chess pieces on the board that can only move by the external imposition of God (Nawar 2021). Alternatively, Augustine has also been accused of rendering seminal reasons internal to corporeal entities, leading to a form of proto-deism (Gunton 1988, 83). God simply plants the seminal reasons into corporeal entities and then steps back, becoming completely irrelevant to the development of corporeal entities.

Oliver argues that both accusations distort Augustine's thought on seminal reasons. He proposes that the seminal reasons endowed within creatures exceed intrinsic or extrinsic classifications. Seminal reasons are intrinsic to creatures in the sense that they do exist within creatures rather than, say, the mind of God. Nevertheless, they are also extrinsic to creatures in the sense that the being and nature of seminal reasons continually depend upon God. Oliver (2016, 392) expresses this idea, describing seminal reasons as "created expressions of the eternal reasons that lie in the Word of God's Wisdom."

Jules Brady (1964, 156) supports this interpretation too, stating that as well as creating seminal reasons within creatures, God "makes the seminal principles continually exist" and "moves the seminal reasons towards Himself who is true rest and joy." Through this understanding of seminal reasons, Augustine avoids the two poles of rendering seminal reasons wholly intrinsic to natural creatures, leading to a form of proto-deism, and making seminal reasons wholly extrinsic to natural creatures, leading to a form of occasionalism. Instead, while seminal reasons are intrinsic to creatures and endow creatures with a particular nature and causal powers, they are extrinsically orientated towards and dependent upon God.¹²

Such a conception of seminal reasons allows Augustine to uphold an intimate connection between God and nature while still respecting God's transcendence and distinction from the created order. Oliver (2016, 385) expresses this view, writing:

Creation has within itself the rational principles of its own perfection and is drawn towards its goal by God's continual providential care and guidance. God is both within and beyond the creature in such a way that we find the blending of intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of divine providence and creation's orientation to specific ends. Whilst in no sense being like creation, God is both immanent to creation and wholly transcendent.

Here, we can see that Augustine's conception of the relationship between God and nature is radically different to the conception assumed in modern interventionist accounts of miracles. Modern interventionist accounts conceive of nature as a self-sufficient entity that God is excluded and contrasted from, as God exists in a separate supernatural realm. In contrast, Augustine emphasizes both the inextricable connection and radical difference between God and nature as the seminal reasons intrinsic to natural creatures are orientated towards and dependent upon God.

Augustine's Metaphysics of Miracles and Exceptions to the Natural Order

With a sound understanding of Augustine's metaphysics of the natural order, we are now in a position to consider his more metaphysically robust conception of miracles. While Augustine's theory of seminal reasons serves as the basis for the uniformity of the natural order, in Book Six of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, he considers how miracles may be accommodated. Augustine supposes that while many creaturely entities develop in a natural manner, there are entities that develop miraculously, in a manner contrary to that entity's natural mode of development. For instance, Augustine references Jesus turning water into wine as an example of a miracle where the entity develops into its final form instantaneously. How are we to account for this form of miraculous development?

To accommodate this question, Augustine develops his theory of seminal reasons. He proposes that the seminal reason within each creature is endowed with a dual potentiality, one that allows for the natural development of the creature and another that allows for the miraculous development of the creature. Expressing this idea, Augustine (1982, 6.13) writes:

[T]hat these reasons were created to exercise their causality in either one way or the other: by providing for the ordinary development of new creatures in appropriate periods of time, or by providing for the rare occurrence of a miraculous production of a creature, in accordance with what God wills as proper for the occasion.

Such a dual potentiality allows Augustine to uphold a metaphysical distinction between natural events and miracles. Natural events occur through the natural potentiality within the seminal reasons of creatures being exercised, and miracles occur through the miraculous potentiality within the seminal reasons of creatures being exercised.

Augustine expands upon the nature of this miraculous potentiality by speaking of the creation of Eve. He writes that in the original creation, God did not determine Eve was to be created in precisely the way she was created,

namely, from the rib of Adam. Rather, “[t]his act of creation determined only the possibility that it could be done thus,” and the fact that it actually came to pass is due to a cause that “was hidden in God, the Creator of all things” (Augustine 1982, 9.18). Augustine (1982, 9.18) considers this event to be paradigmatic of all miracles because “all things that have been made not in the natural development of things, but in a miraculous way to signify this grace, have had their causes also hidden in God.”¹³

This further elucidates Augustine’s metaphysical distinction between miracles and natural events. Natural events occur through the natural potentialities of creatures being exercised. In contrast, miracles occur through a cause hidden in God that activates a miraculous potentiality and leads to creatures behaving in a manner contrary to their usual disposition. As an example, water turns into wine naturally as grapes absorb water through their vines and then ferment. This process of fermentation occurs through the natural potentiality of the seminal reason possessed by grapes. In contrast, water miraculously turns into wine through a cause hidden in God activating the miraculous potentiality of the seminal reason possessed by water to instantaneously turn into wine.

A tendency in scholarship is to describe the act of God activating the miraculous potentiality of an entity through a hidden cause as an act of divine intervention. For instance, Hardon (1954, 231) writes that miracles occur through creaturely entities possessing a potency “which only a direct intervention of God can actuate.” Similarly, discussing Augustine’s theory of miracles, Brady (1964, 150) writes: “When miracles or extraordinary events occur, the seminal reasons are passive capacities from which the divine intervention produces a miraculous effect.” Lydia Schumacher (2023) endorses Brady’s interpretation, describing Augustinian miracles as occurring through divine intervention. Tabaczek (2020, 947) writes that miracles occur for Augustine through “God’s instantaneous and direct intervention” activating a miraculous potentiality within creatures.

By describing Augustinian miracles as occurring through divine intervention, these scholars should not be understood as attributing to Augustine the prevailing interventionist approach to miracles that is paradigmatic in modern thought. As stated earlier, the modern interventionist approach relies on a theologically problematic God–nature relation wherein God is expelled from the workings of nature such that God must intervene to act. This is emphatically not Augustine’s conception of the God–nature relationship, for he conceives nature to be inextricably connected to, dependent upon, and orientated towards God in a manner that preserves divine immanence and transcendence.

So, how should we understand the concept of divine intervention within Augustine’s metaphysics? Mirela Oliva offers a useful conception of divine intervention distinct from the modern interventionist approach. While Oliva discusses the concept of divine intervention in the thought of Thomas Aquinas,

I think her discussion also relevantly bears on Augustine's metaphysics. She writes: "An intervention is not the exception to an otherwise inactive God but the intensification of an ongoing divine action" (Oliva 2024, 2). She uses the metaphor of a music conductor to clarify her idea: "Like a conductor that becomes more energetic when the rhythm turns more dynamic or dramatic, divine action intensifies in certain moments while leading human life on its path. Intervention is this intensified action" (Oliva 2024, 3). On this understanding, the concept of divine intervention is only intelligible in the framework of continual divine providence because it is an intensification of already ongoing divine action rather than a rare action from an otherwise absent God.

I think such a conception of divine intervention maps onto Augustine's conception of the natural order and miracles. As stated, he affirms God's intimate role in the usual course of nature because the seminal reasons implanted in creatures are inextricably connected to, dependent upon, and orientated towards God. Nevertheless, miracles are an intensification of divine action for Augustine because they occur through God activating the miraculous potentiality within creatures. This constitutes an intensification of divine action because the miraculous potentiality within creatures is activated through a cause hidden within God. So, while the usual course of nature occurs through the seminal reasons within creatures being dependent upon and orientated towards God, miracles occur more directly through a hidden cause within God.

Augustine's Contribution to the Contemporary Discussion

In light of this exposition of Augustine's understanding of miracles, how may Augustine's thought inform the contemporary discussion of the nature of miracles? In the first section, I highlighted three central issues with the prevailing interventionist approach. First, it relies on a problematic God–nature relationship that undermines the immanence and transcendence of God. Second, it seems to pit God's special acts against God's regular actions. Third, there is the issue of whether the idea of God intervening in nature is unscientific. I now outline how my engagement with Augustine's thought on miracles may help develop an alternative approach to miracles that can better resolve, dissolve, or alleviate these issues.

First, I have outlined how Augustine offers a radically different conception of the God–nature relationship compared to the modern interventionist approach. While the interventionist approach withdraws God from the natural world such that God must intervene in order to act, Augustine sees God as both immanent to creation and wholly transcendent. He conceives natural creatures to have their own causal powers by virtue of their seminal reasons. Nevertheless, these seminal reasons, while intrinsic to creatures, are extrinsically orientated and dependent upon God. Such a conception preserves the causal integrity of nature while simultaneously respecting the immanence and transcendence of God.

Seeking to replicate such a God–nature relationship in contemporary accounts of miracles is theologically preferable to the prevailing modern interventionist conception of this relationship.

Second, Augustine’s writings on miracles serve as a basis to reformulate the concept of divine intervention in a more satisfying way that avoids the issue of pitting God’s special acts against God’s regular actions. The contemporary interventionist approach typically “entails a separation between moments of divine action on the one hand and moments of non-action on the other” (Oliva 2024, 2). Such a conception of intervention does not fit into Augustine’s metaphysics that affirms God’s constant providential action within the natural order. Rather, divine intervention in Augustine’s thought ought to be understood as an intensification of divine activity since a hidden cause in God activates miraculous potentialities within creatures.

I think the concern of God’s general actions being pitted against God’s special acts is eased by Augustine’s conception of divine intervention. For Augustine, God’s enacting of miracles does not stand against God’s providential role in the usual course of nature. Rather, miracles serve as an intensification of God’s continual providence in the world. There is a certain harmony between natural events and miracles; both are a result of divine action, it is just that miracles occur through a more intense form of divine action. Thus, miracles serve as a development of God’s continued action in the natural world rather than a dramatic departure from it. In turn, there is no contradiction in God causing miracles at particular times and upholding the usual course of nature at others.

A further virtue of Augustine’s approach is that it preserves God’s providential role in the usual course of nature while still respecting the unique category of miracles. Although great focus has been given to Augustine’s subjective definition of miracles in *The Usefulness of Belief*, a key concern with this definition is that there is no longer a unique category of miracles that is distinguished from natural events. However, this concern is remedied when Augustine’s more metaphysically robust conception of miracles is considered. In this conception, miracles are metaphysically distinguished from natural events because miracles occur through God activating a miraculous potentiality by a hidden cause, whereas natural events occur through the regular actualization of seminal reasons within creatures. Thus, the unique metaphysical category of the miraculous is preserved.

However, one concern regarding the applicability of Augustine’s thought to the contemporary discussion regarding miracles is whether Augustine’s thought is compatible with modern science. It may be argued that Augustine’s conception of miracles is unscientific and therefore has little relevance to modern thought regarding miracles. Indeed, while some scholars have interpreted Augustine’s theory of seminal reasons as a prescient conception of evolution, Tabaczek (2020, 945) convincingly argues that Augustine’s theory is incompatible with

the modern theory of evolution. He justifies this claim by stating that the idea of one species arising from another would be unacceptable within “the context of [Augustine’s] neo-Platonist theory of forms as eternal and unchangeable ideas in the mind of God, participated by created beings” (Tabaczek 2020, 956). For Augustine, the potentiality of the development of each species was implanted in the beginning of creation, thus not allowing for new species to develop spontaneously from other pre-existing species.

In response to this concern, I stress that I am not suggesting a return to Augustine’s theory of seminal reasons. Nevertheless, I think a deep engagement with Augustine’s thought on miracles can contribute to the contemporary discussion. The general themes of Augustine’s thought, in terms of understanding the God–nature relationship and the concept of divine intervention in ways that do justice to divine transcendence and immanence, provide a useful set of theological standards in contemporary discussion that have not been sufficiently reflected upon in the prevailing interventionist paradigm.

Nonetheless, the relevance of Augustine’s thought to the contemporary discussion of miracles does not need to be limited to establishing broad theological standards. As I have mentioned, a key difference between Augustine’s thought and modern thought is that Augustine understood the natural order to be grounded in the Stoic notion of seminal reasons, whereas in modern thought the natural order is typically grounded in the concept of the laws of nature.¹⁴

In contemporary philosophy, the laws of nature have been understood in various ways. Some scholars adopt a neo-Humean approach, understanding the laws of nature to be descriptions of particular regularities in the universe.¹⁵ Others propose that the laws of nature are necessary connections between properties.¹⁶ A third prominent way of understanding the laws of nature in modern thought is dispositionalism, in which the laws of nature are grounded by the dispositional or causal character of properties. Each property has a particular causal character such that any entity that possesses that property will behave in particular ways given particular circumstances.¹⁷ There is a certain parallel between Augustine’s theory of seminal reasons and contemporary dispositionalism. On a broad level, both understand the usual order of nature as grounded in powers intrinsic within creaturely entities.¹⁸

In light of this, it seems that more particular aspects of Augustine’s thought on miracles could be relevant to those who understand the laws of nature in a dispositionalist fashion. For instance, as I have argued, Augustine’s theory of seminal reasons exceeds both intrinsic and extrinsic classifications, avoiding the two opposing threats of deism and occasionalism. Thus, Augustine’s writings on seminal reasons may inform contemporary discussion on how to understand the dispositions of an entity in a theologically satisfying manner that pays due respect to both the entity’s own causal power and dependence upon God. Such a theologically grounded conception of dispositions would ensure the

problematic God–nature relationship widespread in modern interventionist accounts is avoided.¹⁹

Furthermore, Augustine’s thought on miracles provides some tools to tackle the objection that a commitment to miracles is unscientific. Recall Macquarrie’s (1966, 248) concern that a commitment to miracles as divine interventions “is irreconcilable with modern science” because modern science relies on a conception of the universe as a causally closed system where all events are caused by preceding events in the same system. I think Augustine’s conception of the dual potentiality of seminal reasons can help advance a response to Macquarrie.

Augustine supposes the usual course of nature occurs when the natural potentiality of creatures is exercised and miracles occur when God intervenes to actualize the miraculous potentiality within creatures. One may understand the dispositions of natural entities in a similar fashion; each entity has natural dispositions that regulate the natural causal behavior of that entity, and each entity also has miraculous dispositions that are actualized by divine intervention and lead to the entity behaving in a miraculous fashion contrary to its usual behavior. On this position, the universe would be causally closed when only natural dispositions of entities are exercised. The universe would not be causally closed when God intervenes to exercise the miraculous dispositions of entities.

In light of this, one could dispute Macquarrie’s claim that modern science relies on a conception of the universe as always being a causally closed system. Instead, one could suppose that the domain of science is limited to only examining the world when it is causally closed. Any instance in which the universe is not causally closed is beyond the realm of science to investigate. Framing this in terms of the dispositionalist understanding of the laws of nature, it is the role of science to examine events where only natural dispositions are being exercised. Any instance where God intervenes to exercise miraculous dispositions is beyond the realm of science to investigate. Thus, miracles, strictly speaking, do not conflict with the laws of nature or the findings of modern science because the domain of science is limited to when only natural dispositions are being exercised, which is not the case when miracles occur.²⁰

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to highlight how a deep engagement with Augustine’s thought on miracles may contribute to the contemporary discussion regarding the nature of miracles.

First, I noted how, in recent times, it has been recognized that the prevailing modern interventionist approach to miracles is plagued with philosophical and theological difficulties. This has led to alternative approaches to miracles being developed, and I sketched out how historical analysis, in particular an engagement with Augustine’s thought, may help this endeavor.

Second, I engaged with Augustine's writings on miracles, arguing that limiting his understanding of miracles to a purely subjective understanding inadequately reflects the depth of his thoughts. I proposed that Augustine also offers a more metaphysically robust conception of miracles, wherein miracles occur through God intervening and activating the miraculous potentiality within creatures; such a conception upholds the unique category of miracles, metaphysically distinguishing them from natural events.

Third, I sought to highlight how Augustine's thought on miracles may contribute to the contemporary discussion regarding the nature of miracles. I noted how the prevailing interventionist approach mainly fails due to its theologically inadequate conception of the God–nature relationship and divine intervention. I argued that Augustine offers a far more appealing conception of the God–nature relationship and divine intervention that ought to be emulated in contemporary accounts. Finally, I outlined more specific ways Augustine's thought may contribute to the contemporary debate in terms of offering a theological conception of dispositions and responding to the objection that a commitment to miracles as divine interventions is unscientific.

Notes

- ¹ See Brooke (1991) and Harrison (1998).
- ² For arguments in favor of this shift in the field of science and religion, see John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag (2021) and Paul Tyson (2022).
- ³ One clarificatory point is that the NIODA approach is not typically related to miracles. Throughout the DAP, miracles received limited attention, with participants focusing more generally on special divine action. For more on this, see Wildman (2008).
- ⁴ For instance, Denis Edwards (2010) and Christopher Knight (2007) offer theistic naturalist accounts of miracles and divine action. For an analysis of various accounts of theistic naturalism, see Sarah Lane Ritchie (2019).
- ⁵ Such an approach understands divine action in the context of Aquinas's doctrine of primary and secondary causation and his analogical analysis of "cause." Ignacio Silva (2022) and Simon Maria Kopf (2023) are two key proponents of a neo-Thomist approach to miracles and divine action.
- ⁶ There are those who still defend the interventionist approach and argue that the aforementioned criticisms can be circumvented. For example, see Alvin Plantinga (2008).
- ⁷ Indeed, it has been argued that alternatives to interventionism, such as NIODA, still implicitly rely on this problematic God–nature relationship. For this criticism of NIODA, see Ritchie (2019).
- ⁸ Of course, the fact that pre-modern theologians worked in a radically different intellectual framework raises the question of whether their thought is relevant to the contemporary intellectual climate. I will address this concern relating to Augustine towards the end of the article.
- ⁹ For example, Wolfhart Pannenberg (2004) supposes that Augustine solely offered a subjective conception of miracles.
- ¹⁰ For an analysis of the development of the modern concept of the laws of nature, see John Henry (2004).
- ¹¹ Lydia Schumacher (2023) notes that Augustine also calls seminal reasons "causal reasons" (*rationes causales*) or "primordial reasons" (*rationes primordiales*). Jules Brady (1964, 145) proposes that other terms equivalent or partially equivalent to seminal reasons are reason (*ratio*), quality (*qualitas*), power (*virtus*), cause (*causa*), potency (*potentia*), principle (*principium*), origin (*primordium*), seed (*semen*), and rule (*regula*).
- ¹² For a deeper analysis of the dependence of creaturely entities upon God and the broader Christian theme of participation, see Andrew Davison (2019).
- ¹³ Peter Lombard develops Augustine's discussion of the creation of Eve in *The Sentences*. Lombard (2008, 18.6) describes the creation of Eve as "beyond nature" (*praeter naturam*) because Adam's rib contained the potentiality—in virtue of its seminal reason—for the development of Eve, but this potentiality needed to be actualized by a cause within God. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.
- ¹⁴ There are certain scholars who dispute whether the universe should be understood in terms of the laws of nature. For instance, see Nancy Cartwright and Keith Ward (2016) and Stephen Mumford (1998).
- ¹⁵ For instance, see David Lewis (1983).
- ¹⁶ For instance, see David Armstrong (1983).
- ¹⁷ For a deeper outline of dispositionalist approaches to the laws of nature, see Alexander Bird (2007).
- ¹⁸ This is not to neglect their differences. Augustine's theory of seminal reasons is primarily concerned with explaining the development of creatures rather than systematizing various causal powers and their given manifestation and stimulus conditions.
- ¹⁹ Providing a theological foundation to the concept of the laws of nature has historical precedence. Indeed, the development of the modern concept of the laws of nature has theological origins. See Harrison (2019).

²⁰ This style of response is similar to Plantinga's (2008) argument that the laws of nature only describe the universe when it is causally closed, meaning miracles do not violate the laws of nature. Where this Augustine-inspired response differs from Plantinga's is that it is based on a dispositionalist understanding of the laws of nature whereas Plantinga uses a more general conception of the laws.

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