

Creation Order and Miracle According to Augustine

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Various theologians have been influenced by Augustine's conception of creation and miracles, and it is therefore useful to have this study of Augustine's own thought on the matter. Mr Gousmett, who lives in Dunedin, New Zealand, did the research for this essay at the library of the Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies in Toronto as part of his work for a course at the Institute of Christian Studies taught by Dr. A. W. Wolters—and takes this opportunity to express his gratitude to both Institutes for their assistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The church has for centuries confessed both that the world was created by God and is constantly upheld and ordered by him, and that God also performs marvellous deeds in bringing redemption and restoration to his people. But it is difficult to maintain that the creation is constantly ordered by God, when such deeds appear to involve a setting aside or suspension of the usual order of the creation to permit the extra-ordinary to happen. As a result, it has been necessary to explain the relationship of creation-order and miracle in a way which avoid such apparent conflict.

Augustine was the first Christian writer who felt obliged to give an account of the possibility of miracles in a world ordered by God. Although Augustine was strongly influenced by Stoic ideas in his view of miracle, he broke fresh ground in terms of expounding the Christian faith. Augustine was also dependent upon conceptions of miracle held by earlier church fathers (but not explained by them in terms of a philosophical understanding of miracle) and like them heavily dependent upon pagan thinkers with regard to concepts of miracle and law-order in creation. Augustine's contribution is important because he tried to think through consistently the consequences of these concepts within a Christian framework of thought. Also, constrained by the Scriptures, he heavily modified these concepts.

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Thus while Augustine adopted many unbiblical ideas to help explain his conception of creation and miracle, he was not entirely uncritical of them. It can be said that while Augustine was synthetic in his thought, he was anti-synthetic in his approach.¹ So while we would take issue with Augustine regarding his use of these pagan ideas, we must also recognise that he was attempting to discover in them genuine truth about the world. Most of the Fathers used this approach to pagan sources, even if they were not anti-synthetic like Augustine.

Augustine did not develop a systematic and extensive account of his concept of miracle, but instead dealt with the subject incidentally in a variety of contexts throughout his writings. The

¹ This was suggested to me by Dr. Al Wolters, Cf. also William A. Christian, 'The creation of the world,' in R.W. Battenhouse, Ed., *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (New York, 1955), 316.

principal passages where he discussed miracle are found in *The City of God*, *On The Trinity*, and *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis*.

2. CREATION AND THE SEMINAL REASONS

Augustine's doctrine of miracle is rooted in his doctrine of creation, and these two doctrines are interdependent in his thought. Indeed his view of miracle can be seen as an attempt to resolve problems in his doctrine of creation, since his interpretation of Genesis 1-2 presented him with a number of difficulties. These did not arise from his view of science,² (although this did cause him problems),³ but from trying to understand the need for two accounts of creation. His solution lay in interpreting Genesis 1 as a description of the implanting of invisible seminal reasons in creation, which would later develop into the things which we find in the world. The second chapter of Genesis describes how, subsequent to the original creative moment, these seminal reasons grew into actual things.⁴

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The idea of seminal reasons (*rationes seminales*) as the sources of all individual things in Augustine's philosophy can be found in the work of other Patristic authors, such as Ambrose, Ephrem of Syria, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. It is present in a variety of non-Christian writers, including Philo, the Stoics, Aristotle, Democritus and Anaxagoras. This idea was originally developed by Anaxagoras (5th century BC), who replaced the then current idea of four elements with the notion of an infinite number of inert prime causes, or seeds, σπέρματα which were activated by thinking rational essence, Νοῦς.⁵ Anaxagoras, like Augustine, was disturbed by the idea that things are now coming into existence which previously had no existence.

What Anaxagoras seems to have been denying is the possibility of producing some new material, or rather the possibility of producing something having properties not previously observed together in any material.⁶

Anaxagoras developed his idea to explain the origin of seeming new things, for he maintained that nothing comes into being and nothing is destroyed; it simply changes into something else. His idea of seeds from which all things developed was to influence Democritus, Aristotle and the Stoics, and through them the Patristic authors.

Democritus held that matter was composed of atoms, whose continuous motion gave rise to all things. This movement was governed by reason.⁷ These two concepts, seeds of nature and

² R.M. Grant, *Miracle and natural law in Graeco-Roman and early Christian thought*. (Amsterdam, 1952), 119.

³ Augustine's scientific ideas do on occasion present him with exegetical difficulties. He holds for instance that insects which multiply in animal carcasses are spontaneously generated. But if this is so then there is a class of creatures which does not derive from the original acts of creation, when all the other insects were created and from which present-day insects descend. This is one instance of the need for seminal reasons to account for the later appearance in time of things which have no obvious connection with God's creative work. Cf. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Translated and annotated by J.H. Taylor. 2 Vols. New York: Newman Press, 1982, 3.14.23 and 4.33.51.

⁴ J. Brady, *The Function of the Seminal Reasons in St. Augustine's Theory of Reality* (St. Louis, 1949), 143.

⁵ M.J. McKeough, *The Meaning of the Rationes Seminales in St. Augustine* (Washington, 1926), 19.

⁶ A. P. Cavendish, 'Early Greek Philosophy' in DJ. O'Connor, (Ed.) *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* (New York, 1964), 11.

⁷ McKeough, op. cit.

elemental substances controlled by external power, are the nucleus of the idea of *rationes seminales*.⁸

Aristotle held that the essence of a thing was internal and not external to it, and is the source of activity in a thing. This essence perfected the potentiality of a thing by reducing it to actuality. This essence has within it the active power to effect actuality. It does not require an external stimulus, although the movement from potency to act is the result of God, the pure Act, calling forth this development. Aristotle also held an idea of latent active and passive powers which evolve under the influence of an external attraction.⁹

The Stoics derived concepts from both Plato and Aristotle. They

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distinguished between active and passive matter, and postulated the existence of fire as the soul of the world which exists in passive matter. This soul is the seed of the universe, containing all the reasons or plans, λόγοι, of all changes, and the germs, σπέρματα, of all future forms which were to evolve. Fire, or God, as active principle, informs and moves matter, the passive principle.¹⁰

It was Philo who asserted that the immanent seminal principles of the Stoics had been planted in nature by the Transcendent God.¹¹ Philo thus introduced the idea into the exegesis of Scripture. Philo however interpreted the seminal reasons differently from the Stoics, for he saw them not as material seeds mingling with matter, but as the workings of the immaterial Λόγος, the totality of God's powers.¹²

Plotinus held that the Νοῦς from which came the world-soul, Ψυχή, which gave rise to the λόγοι σπερματικοί, came into being by a process of emanation from God. These λόγοι σπερματικοί, combine with matter to produce material phenomena.¹³

Among the early Fathers, Basil thought that God in his creative acts of the six days, imparted to matter, which was created from nothing, the power and duty to generate things and that God did not directly form them. In his work of providence, God is keeping the world in existence and supporting its activity, so that the *rationes seminales* become instrumental causes used by God.¹⁴

Gregory of Nyssa, unlike Basil, held that God had created all things simultaneously, imparting a creative impulse which starts the world on its process of development. All things were contained as potential in the formless homogeneous matter as active powers. Gregory's theory emphasised the idea of power rather than the idea of design implied in the term λόγοι σπερματικοί. The powers are not able of themselves to bring about various things, but are

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹¹ Grant, op. cit., 219.

¹² H.A. Wolfson, *Philo. Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), Vol. I, 343.

¹³ McKeough, op. cit., 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

used by God to bring about his design. They are the same in origin and purpose as the *rationes seminales* of Augustine.¹⁵

Augustine accepted the idea put forward by Anaxagoras and developed by the Stoics, of seeds which develop matter into

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things.¹⁶ Boyer has argued¹⁷ that Augustine borrowed his theory from Plotinus, but O'Toole challenges this and contends that Augustine would have had to change Plotinus' theory radically before using it,¹⁸ and argues that Augustine could quite likely have derived it from Basil or Gregory of Nyssa.¹⁹ Gilson and Duhem both contend for a connection with Plotinus, although they claim that Augustine probably held a Christianised version of the Stoic idea.²⁰

La théorie des raisons causales (*causales rationes*), telle que Saint Augustin la propose, a plus de ressemblance avec ce que les Stoiciens disaient des λόγοι σπερματικοί, qu'avec l'enseignement de Plotin touchant les λόγοι σπερματικοί.²¹ N'est il pas clair que la théorie des rationes causales que Saint Augustin nous expose... offre de nombreux points de ressemblance avec la théorie stoïcienne des λόγοι σπερματικοί,? N'est-elle pas une sorte de christianisation de cette dernière?²²

Neither did Augustine adopt unchanged the ideas he borrowed from Aristotle and Plato. For Augustine secondary causes do not draw forms from the potency of matter, but bring to light effects implied from the first moment of creation.²³ Augustine's concept of secondary causes is inspired more by Plato and Plotinus than Aristotle,²⁴ although identical to neither.

Augustine was familiar with the *Timaeus* of Plato in a Latin translation prepared by Cicero, as well as Platonic philosophy as discussed in the works of Cicero and Varro.²⁵ Cicero's translation of the *Timaeus* emphasizes that the souls of mortals were 'planted' in the universe in such a way that they would each come into being in determinate periods of time.²⁶ Thus the idea of

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'seeds' from which all things develop reached Augustine through this source also.

¹⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹⁶ A.C. Crombie, *Augustine to Galileo: The History of science AD 400-1650* (Cambridge, 2nd Edition, 1961), 48.

¹⁷ C. Boyer, *L'idée de Verite' dans la Philosophie de Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1920), 130.

¹⁸ C.J. O'Toole, *The Philosophy of Creation in the Writings of St. Augustine* (Washington, 1944), 71.

¹⁹ Ibid., 72.

²⁰ P. Duhem, *Le Systeme du Monde. Histoire des Doctrines Cosmologique de Platon a Copernic*. Vol. 2. (Paris, 1954), 446. E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine* (London, 1961), 345, n. 35.

²¹ Duhem, op. cit.

²² Ibid., 447.

²³ O'Toole, op. cit., 81.

²⁴ Ibid., 82.

²⁵ M.M. Gorman, 'The Unknown Augustine, A Study of the Literal interpretation of Genesis (De Genesi ad Litteram).' Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1975, 170.

²⁶ Cicero, *Timaeus*, 12.43. Gorman, op. cit., 171.

The debate about sources for Augustine's ideas in this respect will no doubt continue. However it is clear that while there are general characteristics which are common to all sources, Augustine develops his ideas differently from all his predecessors, and explains them sufficiently in his own writings. While influenced by a variety of sources, Augustine uses all of them in original ways. He is a creative thinker, who produced his own synthesis which bears his stamp.

3. THE ETERNAL IDEAS

Augustine saw the ideal forms of Plato in a neo-Platonic fashion as having an eternal existence in the mind of God.²⁷ God, contemplating the ideas, created the seminal reasons *ex nihilo* by an act of his will in the likeness of these eternal ideas.²⁸ The seminal reasons have form only in so far as they are dependent upon the ideas in God's mind.²⁹

These eternal ideas are the Wisdom of God or the Word of God³⁰ and are not simply ideas similar in nature to Platonic forms. There is, however, a distinction between the eternal ideas and the seminal reasons, since the latter have a real physical existence in matter.³¹ These seminal reasons are related both to the eternal ideas by means of participation³² and to God's will, by means of their dependence on God's will for their causative power.³³ Thus Augustine postulated a more intimate link between the seminal reasons and their ratio in the Word of God than the link between Plato's ideas and the things which participate in them.³⁴

This more intimate link is developed by Augustine under the influence of Plotinus' view of the relation between forms and things. Augustine used the neo-Platonic theory of different grades of existence to explain how the seminal reasons are produced in matter. These grades of existence were:

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- 1) In the Word of God (as ideal reasons).
- 2) In the elements of the world where they were created at the beginning (as universal causes).
- 3) In the first individuals of the various classes of beings.
- 4) In the seed produced by these plants and animals.³⁵

For Augustine the seminal reasons have a real physical existence, but in the creation act recorded in Genesis 1 they were not produced with definite bodily form. They did not exist

²⁷ McKeough, *op. cit.*, 23.

²⁸ T. Buford, 'The idea of creation in Plato, Augustine and Emil Brunner.' Unpublished PhD Thesis, Boston University, 1963, 182.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ McKeough, *op. cit.*, 23.

³² Buford, *op. cit.*, 183.

³³ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁴ Gorman, *op. cit.*, 170.

³⁵ McKeough, *op. cit.*, 23.

actually but only potentially,³⁶ and contain as potential all possible species of particular things. This potentiality is actualised through the causative power God built into them, and which is sustained by God's causative will.³⁷ Indeed the seminal reasons do not and cannot exist apart from God's continuing causal activity. God works internally in the seminal reasons as the highest cause. By this means he is working through the essence of things, whereas all other causes work externally on the seminal reasons.³⁸

As, therefore, in the case of spiritual life itself, no one except God can work righteousness in our minds, yet men also are able to preach the gospel as outward means, not only the good in sincerity, but also the evil in pretence; so in the creation of visible things it is God that works from within; but the exterior operations, whether of good or bad, of angels or men, or even of any kind of animal... are applied by Him to that nature of things wherein he created all things.³⁹

All change and development is ultimately dependent on God.⁴⁰ As the seminal reasons develop they give form to matter by developing that which they are capable of becoming.⁴¹ When the earth was created it contained potentially within it as seminal reasons all the things which were to develop later.⁴² These seminal reasons were actually in only two of the elements, water and earth, since all living creatures came from these two elements.⁴³ It was the causative power of God which enabled the living things to develop from these elements. The seminal reasons do not act independently but are dependent on external natural conditions. God does not interfere with his created order to

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induce the seminal reasons to act, but his ordering of all things provides suitable conditions for their development. The external conditions induce the activity but do not determine its direction.⁴⁴

...therefore we do not call parents the creators of men, nor farmers the creators of corn, although it is by the outward application of their actions that the power of God operates within for the creating of these things...⁴⁵

The seminal reasons therefore in the course of their development follow the order of the creation. By controlling the conditions under which these powers operate, it is possible for us to regulate the development of things caused by seminal reasons, and this makes possible the artificial cultivation of plants and animals.⁴⁶

³⁶ Ibid., 33-34.

³⁷ Buford, op. cit., 186.

³⁸ Ibid., 182.

³⁹ *On the Trinity*, 3.8.14.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.8.15.

⁴¹ Buford, op. cit., 187.

⁴² *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 5.23.45.

⁴³ *On the Trinity*, 3.8.13.

⁴⁴ McKeough, op. cit., 49.

⁴⁵ *On the Trinity*, 3.8.13.

⁴⁶ *On the Trinity* 3.9.16. Cf. Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods* 2.81 (p. 156 in the Penguin edition). The reference to measure, number and weight refers to Augustine's idea of the laws for created things, of which these three aspects are the ultimate laws. The 'numbers' of a being refer to the laws for development based upon a specific form for that being. This is an identification of form with number derived from the neo-Platonists, who were following the neo-Pythagorean tradition. See J.H. Taylor, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (on 8.8.16.), 257, n.

Agriculture and other artificial cultivation of living things, and control over non-living things, although purely natural, is possible only through a proper use of the natural laws by which all things are ordered. These cultivated things develop according to the seminal reasons which give them form, according to the power with which they were invested at the beginning. It is not necessary for a subsequent special intervention of God to stimulate their development.⁴⁷ All they require are the proper conditions.

This development is not the completion of the original creative act but the result of the activity of latent powers under the administration of God's providence which sustains and supports the creation continually.⁴⁸ Nothing was created after the first act of creation. This is a crucial point for Augustine, for he makes a sharp distinction between the original act of creation and the continuing work of God's providence.

4. GOD'S WORK OF PROVIDENCE

Augustine's distinction between the original act of creation and the continuing relationship of God to his creation is based both on

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Augustine's understanding of Scripture and on the influence of Stoic thought. Augustine understood Genesis 1:31-2:3 to teach a completed creation to which nothing new has been added. This is the principal Biblical text for Augustine concerning this doctrine.

And God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good. And there was evening and morning, a sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.

But if God had ceased from working, as he understood from this passage in Genesis, Augustine was forced then to explain John 5:17: 'But Jesus answered them, My Father is working still, and I am working.' So Augustine interpreted Genesis 1 as an account of the original act of creation, which is completed and from which God is resting. The work of providence, which began after the creation was finished, continues until now. God no longer creates new things. All new things have their origin in the completed act of creation at the beginning.

Augustine is opposed to the idea that God is still creating new things, since this would contradict the statement of Genesis that on the sixth day God completed all his work. All those things which appear new have their origin in the original act of creation.⁴⁹

48 and 267, n. 58. Compare with the comments on measure, number and weight in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 4.3.7. and 4.6.13.

⁴⁷ McKeough, op. cit., 55, 57.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁹ *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 5.20.41.

But God has continued to work in his providential activity, sustaining that which has been created in the beginning, a view Augustine can maintain only because he distinguished the original act of creation from God's subsequent activity.

Therefore we understand that God rested from all his works that he made in the sense that from then on he did not produce any other new nature, not that he ceased to hold and govern what he had made. Hence it is true that God rested on the seventh day, and it is also true that he works even until now.⁵⁰

Using this distinction between creation and providence,⁵¹ Augus-

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tine is able to sustain his idea that things are not created at the time in which they appear. Everything was created 'in the beginning' prior to its appearance on earth, and only later appears in time, when the seminal reasons are developed. Natural causes are only instruments in this development which take place under the administrative activity of God.⁵²

However there is an important difference between the creation of the seminal reasons and their later manifestation in time. The first plants and animals appear not in the work of creation but under the work of providence.⁵³ These things develop out of the earth, from the seminal reasons planted in the element earth during the days of creation, when the earth received in a hidden way the power of producing plant and animal life.⁵⁴

This theory of seminal reasons allows Augustine to say that there is a distinction between the way things now function according to their laws, and the way in which they were created. When all things were first created they were under the governance of the Wisdom of God, but now their development in time is subject to the ordering of the seminal principles which God has placed within creation. Thus Augustine is able to maintain the radical difference between the days of creation and the present temporal order.⁵⁵

Augustine stresses that everything was created before it appears on the earth, so that things are not created at the time when they appear. But where in the Scripture does he find this? The answer is Genesis 2:4-5. But Augustine was somewhat led astray by his *Vetus Latina* translation of the Septuagint, which read:

When day was made, God made heaven and earth and every green thing of the field before it appeared above the earth, and all the grass of the field before it sprang forth.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.12.23.

⁵¹ This distinction in Augustine's thought depends heavily on Stoicism. Cf. *The Nature of the Gods* 2.75. (p. 154 in Penguin edition). Augustine refers to Cicero's 'nature' as God (Gorman, p. 160) although there is a principal difference between the impersonal providence of neo-Platonism and the Stoics and the personal providence of Augustine. R Jolivet, *Essai sur les Rapports entre la pensée grecque et la pensée chrétienne* (Paris, 1931), 122ff, 138ff. Cited in S.U. Zuidema, 'De Orde-Idee in Augustinus' Dialoog de Ordine. Twee Werelden', *Philosophia Reformata* 28, 1963, 5).

⁵² *On the Trinity* 3.8.13, McKeough, op. cit., 71.

⁵³ McKeough, op. cit., 75.

⁵⁴ *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 8.3.6. Gorman, op. cit., 212.

⁵⁵ *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 4.33.51.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.4.7. Augustine's Latin read: 'Cum factus est dies, fecit Deus caelum et terram et omne viride agri antequam esset super terram, et omne fenum agri antequam exortum est.'

Augustine interprets 'when day was made' to refer to the simultaneous creation of the six days and the day of rest. This 'day', then, was repeated seven times and yet it took place without a lapse of time.⁵⁷ Therefore for Augustine Genesis 2:4-5 refers not to the creation in the Word, since the Word existed before the

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beginning of creation, but to the simultaneous moment when things were made in their seminal reasons.⁵⁸ These creatures then appear in time, under the providence of God.

5. THE DAYS OF CREATION

Augustine understood the creation of the world to have taken place not over six days, or any other actual period of time, but instantaneously. This idea was characteristic of the Alexandrian school of theology (e.g. Clement, Origen). The 'six days' of Genesis 1 were according to Augustine actually 'six simultaneous moments of angelic consciousness through which God's creative activity was understood by the angels' through God's revelation to them.⁵⁹

These moments of revelation were simultaneous, because God created all things simultaneously. Augustine based this view on Ecclesiasticus 18:1, 'He who lives in eternity created all things simultaneously.' That is, God who lives outside of time, created all things instantaneously and simultaneously in time.⁶⁰ This idea Augustine based on the Latin translation of Eccles. 18:1 which reads *simul* (at one time, together) for the LXX κοινῆ, which should however be understood as 'commonly, without exception.' A more accurate translation would be: 'He who lives for ever created the whole universe.'⁶¹ This is one of a number of places where Augustine's exegesis, is adversely affected by the quality of the translation he was using.

However, while Augustine held that all things were created simultaneously at the beginning, not all things appeared at the beginning. As we are well aware, some creatures are only now coming into being. This phenomenon Augustine saw described in Genesis 2, which deals with the coming into being of creatures which were created as potential in the instantaneous creation of Genesis 1. Thus plants were created on the third day but they did not actually appear until their seminal reasons were activated in time.⁶² Thus there is a discontinuity between the appearance of creatures in time and their creation 'in the beginning'. The first falls under the work of providence and not of creation. This interpretation was supported by Augustine's Latin translation of

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⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.3.6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 5.4.8-9.

⁵⁹ Gorman, op. cit., 2.

⁶⁰ Gorman, op. cit., 133.

⁶¹ Taylor, op. cit. Vol. 1, 254, n. 69.

⁶² Ibid., 6.10.17.

Genesis 2:9 which read: 'Again from the earth God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.'⁶³

The emphasis placed by Augustine on 'again' was to ensure that God's creative power was not thought to be limited to creation 'in the beginning'.⁶⁴ The word 'again' is a translation of Augustine's Latin version which read *adhuc*. It was stated in Genesis 1:12 that the earth brought forth trees. This refers to the creation of trees in their seminal reasons. Later God makes the seminal reasons produce trees which then appear above the ground. The sense of 'again' for Augustine was not that God made different trees, but that he brought the same trees to their perfection.⁶⁵ Thus Paradise was formed in the same way that God makes trees, forests and crops today, by activating the seminal reasons to bring forth the plants hidden within them.⁶⁶ Referring to those who disbelieve the account in Genesis, Augustine asks 'Why are they so unwilling to believe that Paradise was made just as they now see forests being made?'⁶⁷

6. THE NATURE OF MIRACLE AND THE MIRACLE OF NATURE

Following the pattern he established in distinguishing between creation and providence, Augustine likewise distinguished between the original creation and the subsequent working of miracles. While miracles are rooted in the act of creation, they are not identical to the act of creation. God created the world in a marvellous fashion. However, this is to be distinguished from his subsequent and equally marvellous work of providence in sustaining what he had made. While everything was created *de novo* in the beginning, nothing new is created in a miracle, which is simply the development and directing of potentialities which were placed in the creation at the beginning. While the work of creation is solely God's, the working of miracles can involve intermediary agents such as angels and people. But from the point of view of God's activity, there is no distinction between the first act of creation and the subsequent development in time of the various species of created things. Both individual entities and their originals are the products of the development of seminal reasons in giving form to matter.

For Augustine it is the same God who created the world who is

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working miracles. Miracles are simply the way in which the power of God is manifest to us in the present age, revealing the Creator. Because of the rebellion of mankind, however, we are unable or unwilling to recognise that it is God who is at work in all things, and by frequent contact with the daily marvels of the providence of God we become innured to them.⁶⁸ Thus miracles are given to reawaken our sense of wonder and respect for God.

For who is there who considers the works of God, whereby this whole world is governed and regulated, who is not amazed and overwhelmed with miracles? If he considers the

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 8.3.6.

⁶⁴ Gorman, *op. cit.*, 237.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *op. cit.*, (on 8.3.6.), Vol. 2, 254, n. 14.

⁶⁶ Gorman, *op. cit.*, 212.

⁶⁷ *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 8.1.3.

⁶⁸ *The Usefulness of Believing* 16.34.

vigorous power of a single grain of any seed whatsoever, it is a mighty thing, it inspires his with- awe. But since men, intent on a different matter, have lost the consideration of the works of God, by which they should daily praise him as the Creator, God has, as it were, reserved to himself the doing of extra-ordinary actions, that, by rousing them with wonder, he might rouse men as from sleep to worship him. A dead man has risen again; men marvel; so many are born daily, and none marvels. If we reflect more considerately, it is a matter of greater wonder for one to be who was not before, than for one who was to come to life again. Yet the same God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, doeth by his word all these things; and it is he who created who governs also.⁶⁹

Thus for Augustine the primary function of miracles is heuristic, demonstrating the wonders of God, teaching us to worship him, and reminding us of the Creator on whom all things are dependent. Thus he asks in a number of places whether it is at all remarkable that God works miracles, since it is a far greater thing to create the world than to perform any subsequent marvellous deed within it. Augustine uses this as a polemic against those who ridicule the idea of miracles, since these are so much the lesser than the act of creation, and also to draw attention to the Creator, since though we marvel at these lesser deeds we have ceased to marvel at the mighty power which brought the world into being, a far greater wonder.

The central purpose of miracle then is to reawaken wonder at God's providence, and to teach us something of who he is and what he does for us. Thus miracles not only cause us to wonder, but they are also signs to us of that which God wishes to communicate.⁷⁰

However there is a paradoxical element to this theme in Augustine. If we are indeed blase about the wonder of providence since it is so common and ordinary, could this not also be the

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result if miracles too were common? This indeed is the case according to Augustine. In his day, miracles were rare, and this he interprets as the need for miracles to be able to reawaken wonder and praise to God. This would not be the case if they were more frequent.⁷¹ But then, while he says that rare miracles indeed move us to wonder and awe, we should be moved to more wonder by creation itself. The common things of the world, by their frequency, constancy and trustworthiness, should be seen as really more wonderful than a rare and exceptional occurrence, since what is more marvellous than the world taken as a whole?⁷²

If we were to see the ordinary things around us as it were for the first time, then we would indeed marvel at them, as we would marvel at the entire creation had we but eyes to see it.⁷³ However the constancy of these events, wonderful in themselves, takes away our admiration for them.⁷⁴

But where in all the varied movements of creation is there any work of God which is not wonderful, were it not that through familiarity these wonders have become small in our

⁶⁹ *On the Gospel of John* 8.2.1.

⁷⁰ *On the Trinity* 3.10.19.

⁷¹ *The Usefulness of Believing* 16.34.

⁷² *The City of God* 10.12; *On the Gospel of John* 14.1. (John 6:1-14). Cf. Lacey, op. cit. 80.

⁷³ *The Usefulness of Believing* 16.34.

⁷⁴ *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 80. (John 6:9).

esteem? Nay, how many common things are trodden underfoot, which, if examined carefully, awaken our astonishment.⁷⁵

For what is more marvellous than the growth of plants, the opening of leaves, the moving stars, colour, taste, sound and scent.⁷⁶ We cease to wonder at these not because we understand them, but simply because they are familiar. The wonder of a thing is dependent not upon its rarity or familiarity, but on the abstruseness of its cause.⁷⁷

However Augustine argues that if we see the act of creation itself as a miracle, and different from the work of providence, which we do not see as miraculous, then we have simply taken the rare and unusual as the characteristic of miracle, and not its origin in God's work. The work of creation is, like some other events, unusual only because it is the first event of its kind. But then this could lead to the

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conclusion that if God's work is rare and unusual, then we could assume that God did not make the world, since we do not see him creating worlds any more. Therefore since God is supposedly not involved in the present-day care and ordering of the world, causing plants to grow and so on, then what reason would we have to assume that God was involved in their first appearance?

Augustine is struggling here against a view which would separate God from Creation, postulating perhaps the eternity of matter, and thus denying any creation 'in the beginning'. Augustine concludes by asking why it is desired to see God as creating Paradise in any way other than that by which trees grow today.⁷⁸ So while he wants to distinguish both the eternity of God from the temporality of creation, and the creation 'in the beginning' from the present-day coming into being of creatures, he insists that the distinction be drawn correctly. The events which are similar must be placed together. That is, the appearance of plants and animals in Genesis 2 belongs to the present order of things, and not to the events of the creation 'in the beginning'. It is therefore not miraculous.⁷⁹

The plants and animals are of course the result of the activity of the seminal reasons, the causes of things in the world. For Augustine God is the source of the whole succession of causes, and any events we do not understand are the result of the working of causes which are hidden from us.⁸⁰ This is a result of the combination of a Stoic faith in natural law and providence with a sceptical insistence on the limits of human knowledge'. Therefore Augustine insists on the necessity of revelation to inform us of those things which would otherwise remain hidden from us.⁸¹

⁷⁵ *Letters of Saint Augustine* 3.10. This comment concerning the empirical study of nature should help dispel the notion that Augustine was opposed to scientific study, and simply promoted the transmission of an and science from 'authorities' such as Aristotle and other classical writers. Augustine repeatedly stresses the need for close attention to the creation so we can learn from it, since all creation discloses the glory of God.

⁷⁶ *The Usefulness of Believing* 16.

⁷⁷ *On the Psalms* 118.27. Cf. Lacey, op. cit., 79.

⁷⁸ *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 8.1.3.

⁷⁹ McKeough, op. cit., 75, 77, 173.

⁸⁰ Grant, op. cit., 218.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

This appointment by God of natural order can be known only by means of revelation, not by our experience, since the point at issue is our very experience of nature. Augustine stresses that what is contrary to our experience is not contrary to God's order. What is contrary to our usual experience is what we call a miracle. Augustine's definition of miracle is as follows: *But I call that a miracle, whatever appears that is difficult or unusual or above the hope or power of them that wonder.*⁸²

However the element of wonder, while a crucial element of a miracle ('for how is something miraculous if we do not wonder at

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it?')⁸³ is in itself not sufficient to warrant calling something a miracle; it must also bring some benefit.

For, if one were to see a man flying, inasmuch as that matter brings no advantage to the spectator, beside the spectacle itself, he only wonders. But if any affected with grievous or hopeless disease were to recover straightaway, upon being bidden, his affection for him who heals will go beyond even his wonder at his healing.⁸⁴

Any miraculous event will bring profit to those who understand its significance and benefit from the working of the miracle, whereas others who only see the wonder, and do not understand the truth conveyed, do not benefit.⁸⁵

7. ARE MIRACLES CONTRARY TO NATURE?

Were we to have a perfect understanding of the nature of the creation, then there would be nothing that we would call miraculous, since miracle is simply the (humanly speaking) obscure and incomprehensible in nature. Miracles are not miraculous if we realise that they are God's doing.⁸⁶ 'Nature is all order, and all miracle, but the miracle is the order.'⁸⁷ All nature, according to Augustine, is orderly movement which is governed by a law which directly creates and sustains the creatures in nature. They are what they are because of the unremitting activity of this law producing order.⁸⁸

Since this law or principle is found within the natures of the things in which it operates, there is no conflict between the order of creation and the miracles of God. Everything, including miracle, is a result of the operation of the seminal reasons implanted in creation by God at the beginning.⁸⁹ So a miracle cannot be contrary to nature since everything without exception is ultimately caused by God. Augustine holds that if we should ever know everything, then the idea of *contra naturam* would itself disappear.⁹⁰

⁸² *The Usefulness of Believing* 16.34.

⁸³ '...because they would not move, unless they were wonderful, and if they were usual, then they would not be wonderful.' *The Usefulness of Believing* 16.34.

⁸⁴ *The Usefulness of Believing* 16.34.

⁸⁵ *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 48.3.

⁸⁶ *On the Gospel of John* 5.1.

⁸⁷ C.N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New York, 1957), 443.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 441.

⁸⁹ *On the Trinity* 3.5-10.

⁹⁰ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids, 1952), 198.

So miracles are not contrary to nature, imposed upon it by an

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outside agency which interrupts the normal order of creation. Everything in creation works within the law established by the Creator, and therefore there is no place for external agencies to work counter to God's law.⁹¹

For how is that contrary to nature, which happens by the will of God, since the will of so mighty a Creator is certainly the nature of each created thing?⁹²

Since then everything that occurs in nature is in conformity with the law God established for the nature of things, nothing can occur which is contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we can know of nature. With regard to the strange phenomenon in which the planet Venus appeared to change its size, shape and colour, Augustine explains that God has established 'the exact ordered course of the stars' governed by 'laws so sure and inflexible,' that any change in appearance is also governed by these laws.⁹³ What seems to be contrary to the course of nature is simply a rare occurrence contrary to the 'canons of the astronomers... by which they tabulate, as by unerring computation, the past and future movements of the stars, so as to take upon them to affirm that this which happened to the Morning Star never happened before or since.'⁹⁴ Thus such strange and rare events, like miracles, are not contrary to the laws of nature, but to human formulations of laws, developed by observation of regularities, which however do not take account of possibilities which still lie hidden within the creation. But such events which diverge from what we have come to expect, although simply unusual, may qualify as miracles.

But when such things happen in a continuous kind of river of ever-flowing succession, passing from the hidden to the visible, and from the visible to the hidden, by a regular and beaten track, then they are called natural; when, for the admonition of men, they are thrust in by an unusual changeableness, then they are called miracles.⁹⁵

But when an event occurs which is contrary to all our experience of nature, then Augustine argues, it is not inappropriate to speak of God as acting contrary to nature, since what we know of the order of nature is our experience of it. But in the light of Scripture those of strong faith will recognise that this is only a manner of speaking and not a description of the actual course of events.

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There is, however, no impropriety in saying that God does a thing contrary to nature, when it is contrary to what we know of nature. For we give the name nature to the usual common course of nature; and whatever God does contrary to this, we call a prodigy, or a miracle.

⁹¹ Lacey, op. cit., 75.

⁹² *City of God* 21.8.

⁹³ *City of God* 21.8; *On the Trinity* 3.6.11.

⁹⁴ *City of God* 21.8.

⁹⁵ *On the Trinity* 3.6.11.

But against the supreme law of nature, which is beyond the knowledge both of the ungodly and of weak believers, God never acts, any more than he acts against himself.⁹⁶

Augustine maintains that all miracles have a reason for their occurrence. However we may not know the reason since it may be hidden in God. Augustine argues this way to refute the Platonists who claim that while nature is reasonable, that is, there can be a reason discovered for everything that happens in nature, there are no reasons for miracles. But Augustine holds that everything that happens must be reasonable, and if some things do not appear to be reasonable, then it is simply because God has not made the reasons known to us.

8. MIRACLES AND THE ORDER OF CREATION

Miracles, far from being contrary to nature, are in fact founded in the order of creation. They are the result of the operation of the seminal reasons, just as this is the case for every event or thing. This applies both to genuine miracles of faith worked by Christians and to magical wonders worked by heathen. By this means Augustine is able to maintain his insistence that nothing exists save that which was created at the beginning by God. At 'the beginning,' all things were made either actually or potentially. That is, in the outworking of creation as recorded in Genesis 2, some things manifested themselves while others remained hidden as potential.⁹⁷

Also, when he created the seminal reasons, God placed within them both a certain necessity, or the usual mode of operation they would have, and also a passive capacity for unusual modes of operation.⁹⁸ Therefore the usual course of nature follows the 'natural laws' given for it in the intrinsic nature of the seminal reasons. But in the unusual events which are called miracles, the potential and passive capacity, which is also intrinsic to these seminal reasons, is manifested. In both cases the events are perfectly natural, and both have their origin in God. But in the

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latter case, there is at work a mode of causation different from that of ordinary events, where the potential capacity for a different function is activated by God.⁹⁹

In such a case the events are unusual since they do not follow what we have come to expect in the ordinary course of events. But there is no intervention by God in an established causation, which is thereby disrupted. It is simply a difference between God's usual and unusual operation.¹⁰⁰ Since God is the first and highest cause of all things,¹⁰¹ there can be no rigid chain of causation which must be broken to permit the occurrence of a miracle. Therefore it is only a matter of which cause God makes use of in a specific event, since no event is outside of or separate from God as its ultimate cause.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeus* 26.3.

⁹⁷ E.g. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 5.4.11.

⁹⁸ Brady, op. cit., 147.

⁹⁹ Grant, op. cit., 218. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 6.14.25.

¹⁰⁰ *On the Trinity* 3.5.11.

¹⁰¹ *On the Trinity* 3.4.9.

¹⁰² C. Richardson, 'The enigma of the Trinity,' in R.W. Battenhouse, Ed., *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (New York, 1955), 243-4. See also McKeough, op. cit., 73-4.

Central to Augustine's idea of causation, and indeed to all his thought, is the idea of creation order.¹⁰³ His first attempt to formulate a comprehensive theory of the nature of the universe is found in *De Ordine*. The purpose of this treatise is to demonstrate that the providence of God governs all things, and therefore everything is ordered by God.¹⁰⁴ This order is not the blind necessity of the Stoics, but an order intelligently imposed.¹⁰⁵ Everything works within an ordered scheme established by the Creator, and therefore there can be no intervention in nature from outside of it.¹⁰⁶

Augustine argued that miracles do not break into the course of nature but are part of the order of nature as a whole. He could say this because of his concept that immanent seminal reasons are the causes of miracles, but which are also part of the order of creation. Lacey argues however that the doctrine of reserved causes, those

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which are not implanted in the creation but retained in the custody of the Divine Will, can be understood as an intervention in the course of the creation order.¹⁰⁷ However Augustine argues that this does not mean an intervention in nature, since causes which are placed in the creation and those which are reserved in the Divine Will, are all given by the will of God, and there can be no contradiction within God's will.¹⁰⁸ Also, the reserved causes do not introduce anything new into the order of creation, but simply activate passive seminal reasons which God has not permitted other agents to activate.

For Augustine miracles are dependent on the created potential of things. They are not intrusions into the created order, and are dependent on God as the ultimate cause. There is however a difference between miracle and ordinary event, otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish them. Apart from their unusual character, miracles are worked by voluntary providence, through the instrumentality of men and angelic beings, rather than spontaneously through natural providence. In other words, miracles do not just happen. They have to be worked by men, angels or God.

Natural providence is the hidden administration by God in creation, while voluntary providence is that which is accomplished through the work of men or angels.¹⁰⁹ God is not intervening in either case. Natural forces are being used in the ordinary way, in the one case spontaneously, in the other through the free will of angels and man. But in either case only the effects placed by God in creation as seminal reasons are possible. That is, they must be in

¹⁰³ P. Steen, *The Structure of Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought* (Toronto, 1983), 99. This can be seen from Augustine's treatment of Psalm 148:7-8. 'Praise the Lord from the earth, monsters of the sea and all deeps, fire, hail, snow and ice, and storm winds fulfilling his command.' Nothing seems to be so much driven by chance as the turbulence and storms by which these lower regions of the heavens... are assaulted and buffeted. But when the Psalmist added the phrase 'fulfilling His command' he made it quite clear that the plan in these phenomena subject to God's command is hidden from us, rather than that it is lacking to universal nature. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 5.12.41.

¹⁰⁴ A.G. Vos, 'Augustine's view of created reality.' Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1970, 20.

¹⁰⁵ Lacey, op. cit., 73.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰⁸ *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 6.18.29.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 8.9.17; 8.24.25; 8.26.48. Augustine frequently refers to 1 Corinthians 3:7 to prove that all things originate with God, and that no matter what a man or angel does, only God can make their work of effect as the ultimate cause of what they do. Cf. Ibid., 5.6.18; 9.8.16; 9.15.26; 9.18.35.

accordance with the laws and possibilities created by God at the beginning, and only in so far as God permits them to be manifested. Without such permission there is no way that the hidden potential can be manifested in a miraculous way. The fallen angels or demonic powers can work miracles only when permitted by God. But even when such permission is given, only the created potential can be manifested. But since control over the possibilities hidden in the creation is dependent on knowledge of those possibilities, then angels and demons are able to work miracles which are impossible to human beings without a Divine revelation of those possibilities. Angels and fallen angels have a knowledge of the essence of things, a perception of the seminal reasons,¹¹⁰ and they are able to use this knowledge to work miracles.¹¹¹

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However Augustine argues that it is possible for us to understand something of the way in which angels are able to produce extraordinary effects. With regard to the plagues in Egypt, for instance, the production of vast numbers of frogs and serpents is wonderful to us, and yet it should not be, since there is no unusual manifestation of the seminal reasons, but simply a more efficient and rapid use of them to produce the desired affect. Were we also to possess the subtlety of perception the angels have, and their speed of movement, we could duplicate these effects.¹¹²

But even then, this would be possible only because God had permitted it. There is no possibility of angels or men performing deeds not permitted by God.¹¹³ And since we are not permitted to do certain things, it is not unreasonable that we fail to attain to them.

For we know that a man can walk, yet that he cannot do so if he is not permitted; but that he cannot fly even if he be permitted.¹¹⁴

The reason we wonder at extra-ordinary events is because we do not have the knowledge to perform them, whereas we do not wonder at those things which we know how to do. These do not cause any wonder in us, no matter how difficult they may be. But if something is done by means with which we are not acquainted, then it is no surprise if we marvel at it.¹¹⁵ When Aaron's rod became a serpent, this is because God permitted the angels to activate hidden seminal reasons within the rod so that it would suddenly become a reptile. Likewise the evil angels were permitted to imitate this with the rods belonging to Pharaoh's magicians (Exodus 7:8-12).¹¹⁶

It may be asked then, what hidden potential does a stick have to become a serpent? The answer lies with Augustine's scientific views. It was simply a speeding up of the process by which snakes are produced spontaneously from rotting wood.¹¹⁷ Therefore neither Aaron nor Pharaoh's magicians were creating something new, but simply acting as the agents in what was for Augustine a perfectly natural process, contained in the seminal reasons of the rods. Neither were the frogs created from nothing (Exodus 8:5-7) but they were produced through

¹¹⁰ See section 5 above.

¹¹¹ *On the Trinity* 3.8.13.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 3.8.17.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.8.13.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.9.18.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.10.20.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.9.18. Brady, *op. cit.*, 143-4.

¹¹⁷ Grant, *op. cit.*, 217. See also note 4 above.

natural processes implanted in the creation by God and controlled by the magicians under the guidance of evil spirits, with God's permission.¹¹⁸

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Similarly the changing of the water into wine was the speeding up of a natural process.¹¹⁹ It comes from the control exercised by Christ over the material forces of nature.¹²⁰ By this means a natural effect was produced in an extraordinary way, which goes beyond the active powers of matter. This is then called a miracle. But it is not going beyond the order of creation in any way, since it is perfectly normal for water to become wine. It has the passive potential to do so by means of the grape vine. This means is not miraculous. But when the intervening stages in changing water into wine are eliminated, that is a miracle.¹²¹

Or the blooming of Aaron's rod (Numbers 17:8) demonstrates that there are no active causes in the rod sufficient to produce this effect, but there is a cause hidden with God which is sufficient. But this is possible only because there exists in the rod the passive potential to receive this effect.¹²² This does not mean however that God is intervening in the course of nature, according to Augustine. There is within creation the possibility of such extraordinary effects but no necessity for the creation to produce them, indeed no possibility without the activity of an agent in stimulating the seminal reasons to produce them. In such a case a miracle occurs.

Since miracles can be worked by anyone who has the requisite knowledge of the seminal reasons which are hidden within the creation, Augustine argues, then it is essential to know how to test the miracles to discover whether or not they are from God. A visible marvel does not imply God's approval.¹²³ A true miracle brings glory to God, not the one who performs the miracle,¹²⁴ and saints bear witness to God with their miracles, while demonic powers try to pass themselves off as divine.¹²⁵

The purpose of a miracle, apart from glorifying God, is to reawaken wonder at the gracious providence of God for the creation. The miracles of healing and raising the dead worked by Christ were visible signs of the good health God wished to impart

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to the souls of mankind.¹²⁶ The miracles of Christ over the powers of nature are to point directly to the providence of God and the eternal Sonship of Christ.¹²⁷

¹¹⁸ McKeough, op. cit., 40. *On the Trinity* 3.8.13.

¹¹⁹ Grant, op. cit., 217.

¹²⁰ W. Carroll, 'St. Augustine's preaching on miracles,' *Homiletics and Pastoral Review* 48 (1948), 757.

¹²¹ *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 6.13.24. McKeough, op. cit., 74.

¹²² *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 9.17.32. McKeough, op. cit.

¹²³ *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount* 2.25.84. Lacey, op. cit., 82. Augustine further on in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (2.25.85.) stresses that the miracles indeed are real, but wicked men use them to deceive and lead people astray. Therefore we cannot dismiss such miracles as illusion, but neither can we accept the message of the false prophets who perform them.

¹²⁴ *83 Questions*, 79.

¹²⁵ *City of God* 23.10; Lacey, op. cit. 82.

¹²⁶ Carroll, op. cit., 755.

¹²⁷ Carroll, 757.

9. CONCLUSION

Augustine's view of miracle is then a thoroughly worked out and comprehensive account of the order of creation and all events which occur within that order, including miracles. Everything was created by God 'in the beginning,' and everything we discover in the world subsequent to that is founded in and dependent upon its creation as a potential 'in the beginning'. Miracles do not contravene the order of creation, but simply go beyond what we have come to expect from our experience of that order. Were we to have the understanding of this order that the angels possess, we would still marvel, but we would also recognize that everything was purely ordered event, the outworking of the seminal reasons.

If we were to recognize the wonder of the everyday events which constantly surround us, we would see everything as a miracle. But since we have become so accustomed to these events, God introduces into our experience unusual or unexpected events to re-awaken our wonder at his providence and creative power.

The difficulties with Augustine's view of miracle include his dependence on neo-Platonic and Stoic philosophy. Also, his inadequate translations of Scripture caused him to develop ideas and interpretations which we find strange and unsupportable. But we must also acknowledge that the power of his thought and the consistency of his conceptions meant that his influence on subsequent Christian thought, even to the present day, gives his ideas a significance they would not otherwise have.

Much of the structure of this thought about creation and miracle is still presented as valid, although the philosophical roots from which it developed are not acknowledged. But since his theory was developed to resolve problems in his philosophy, then use of his ideas divorced from that context renders them incomprehensible and bizarre.

Augustine's influence to some extent hinders the development of a truly Biblical conception of creation and its relationship to miracle. Only by understanding the influences which have shaped our theological traditions, such as the monumental work

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of Augustine, can we critically reflect on our own ideas and discern the weaknesses we have inherited.

There are, aside from the philosophical problems, a number of inconsistencies in Augustine's ideas which make them less useful than they otherwise could have been. For instance, if all of nature is a miracle, then the distinction between miracle and everyday events is lost. However Augustine wants to retain the distinction, and does it by means of the theory of seminal reasons which have potential that can be activated only by God or with God's express permission. But 'without the ordinary repetition of events in nature there could not appear the extra-ordinary which distinguishes the miraculous.'¹²⁸

If we were to wonder at everything, as we would do were we faithful believers, recognising everything as a miraculous work of God, then for the believer there would be no extraordinary

¹²⁸ J. Mourant, 'Augustine on miracles' *Augustinian Studies* 4 (1973), 103.

event 'which causes wonder. 'With the knowledge of perfect faith miracles to the pious man would be no more extraordinary and wondrous than other events in nature.'¹²⁹ Such a believer recognizes that from man's perspective miracles are extraordinary, but from God's perspective they are part of the natural order.¹³⁰ We acquire such a perspective through means of 'revelation, which teaches us that everything that occurs does so in the will of God. Therefore through the Scripture we recognize the will of God, and as our understanding and faith increase, so our sense of wonder will tend to diminish with respect to miracles.¹³¹

One reason for this is that revelation informs us as to the purpose of a specific miracle, so that we do not merely wonder but grow in faith and understanding of that which the miracle communicates to us. If we merely wonder at a miracle and do not grow in faith, then it is of no profit to us. This may be the most significant point that Augustine wishes to make with regard to miracles. They are not given for their own sake, but to restore to a fallen humanity the awareness of the constant providence of God and to reawaken wonder at the marvels of his creation. Miracles when properly understood will lead us to praise God and recognize him as Lord and Creator of all that is.

*Who is like unto thee, O Lord among the gods,
who is like unto thee, majestic in holiness,
terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?*

Exodus 15:11

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<http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/>

¹²⁹ Ibid., 107.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 111.

¹³¹ Ibid., 126.