

‘You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive’: Demonic Agency in Augustine¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

To my knowledge, there has not been an extended treatment of Augustine’s demonology. In fact, scholars have largely ignored the topic, the examination of which is limited within larger works on other matters to short sections and passing comments. This is a dangerous omission if indeed Jeffrey Russell is correct in writing that “the Christian’s chief problem and first duty has been seen as the discernment of spirits, the effort to pierce through lies and façades to the true good and evil that lies at the heart of the matter.”²

This paper, being the beginning of my exploration of the nature and role of demons in Augustine’s thought, must be limited to one essential claim, the trajectory of which, however, I hope, in further research on Augustine will help to correct the tendency to overlook or belittle the stark reality of demons and the very real effects of their agency. I shall argue that the miracles that Augustine attributes to demons have a relative status. This relativity of the miraculousness of demonic activity is at once both limiting and reifying. A wondrous phenomenon wrought by a demon might not actually happen, but instead merely appears to one whose senses or mind have been deceived. This kind of power has been written about by G.R. Evans, who understands all demonic activity as “deception of individual minds” and “playing with [...] perceptions.”³ In such cases, the demonic marvels are miraculous relative to the individual because they do not actually exist beyond subjective experience. However, the second kind of relativity involves the very real, physical effects of demonic activity, which Evans denies. The character of the demons’ bodies

1. For the sake of consistency, I shall translate/transliterate the Greek ‘δαίμων’ and Latin ‘*daemon*’ as ‘demon.’ Other common transliterations include ‘*daemon*’ and ‘*daimon*.’ Wherever I use ‘demon,’ understand ‘δαίμων’ and ‘*daemon*’ throughout.

2. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), at 216.

3. See G.R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 98–111, at 108.

and the length of their lives provide abilities beyond what the human can achieve, but, as natural, created beings, demons are bound by the physical rules of nature. Demons possess no supernatural powers, nor do they have perfect knowledge. Just as our wonder ceases when we are shown how a magic trick is executed, human astonishment makes way for rational understanding once we comprehend demonic nature. Such a miracle performed by a demon actually occurs; the human observer is not deceived and the effect is real. The miraculousness in these cases arises from human ignorance of demonic biology and the physical laws of nature. This ignorance leads men to posit supernatural abilities and causes for these events. Augustine's position maintains the power of demonic agency to cause real effects; while they can be, not all demonic wonders are mere illusions, or only apparent to the human who is deceived. While demons are unable to fundamentally alter matter in ways inconsistent with either their own natures or the physical laws of the universe, they nevertheless, just like any other creature, can physically affect the world they inhabit. Thus, for Augustine, there is reason to fear demons, not only because of the graver negative influence they can have over the human mind and moral character, but because they can also affect the human body and the other physical bodies with which the human being interacts. This fact goes towards explaining Augustine's concern over magic and the occult in general, for in his view, demons not only affect humans mentally and morally, but also bodily.

This paper will proceed first by briefly addressing Augustine's views on demonic ontology and epistemology. From these considerations, Augustine's position on demonic agency in relation to his understanding of the nature of miracles will follow. Before I begin, I would also like to state my approach to Augustine's demonological writings. I will follow the methodology of Gregory Smith, who undertakes a literal reading of demonological texts, which avoids the tendency to explain away such elements of 'otherwise serious' philosophers by appeals to metaphor and psychology. Smith writes,

I would suggest [...] that the physicality of demons bears an inverse relation to the need for metaphor to describe them, once you start looking more closely at demon and text. In the discussion below this serves as a kind of methodological point of departure: when reading or thinking about ancient demons, begin by taking what is said about their nature and activity as literally, as physically, as possible. Of course, even a perfectly sensible literal reading need not exclude metaphor; quite the contrary, but the reverse is truer still, and easier to forget.⁴

4. Gregory Smith, "How Thin Is a Demon?" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16.1 (2008): 479–512, at 482–83.

II. DEMONIC ONTOLOGY

Augustine never denies the reality of demons.⁵ He must give credence to, and take very seriously, the pagan demonologies, lest he risk invalidating related content in Scripture. In the *De Trinitate* and the *De Diversis Quaestionibus*, Augustine defends and attempts to explain rationally and philosophically the activity of demons, demonic possession, summoning, and other arcana in the Old Testament. Understanding, for example, the Greek and Roman pantheon of gods described in the myths to be, in fact, demons, allowed the ancients and medievals to maintain both the reality of these imperfect, though elevated, beings, and the continuity of their traditional religion and history, along with a more philosophical conception of the one God who is highest and perfect. Dante demonstrates such a position when in the first canto of the *Inferno* he has Virgil state, “I lived in good Augustus’ Rome, in the day of the false gods who lied.”⁶ Here it is *not* the case that the *dèi falsi* did not exist, but rather, they lied about their position within the hierarchy of divine beings.⁷ The joining of philosophical reflection to traditional religion and myth is a defining characteristic of Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism in general, grounded in Plato’s dialogues.⁸ Demonology is an essential feature of the religious traditions that are taken up into Platonism, which develops alongside of and within philosophy. Peter Habermehl notes in his discussion of the impact of Middle Platonic demonology on the thought of Apuleius:

The radical transcendence of the supreme godhead and the unbridgeable distance between gods and humans, as postulated by the Peripatetics, fueled the Platonists’ urge to reconcile man with the divine [...]. [D]emonology furnished a solution. It postulated a divine hierarchy in which the demons’ protean agency guarantees all interaction between men and deity. By ascribing multiplicity and mobility to these intermediary beings, demonology helped to preserve traditional polytheism and, at the same time, the unity, remoteness and serenity of the divine realm.⁹

5. Cf. Evans, 101, who agrees that “Augustine fully accepts the existence of such spirits.”

6. *Inf.* 1.71–72: “*e vissi a Roma sotto ’l buono Augusto / nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiari.*” I use the text in Robert Pinsky (trans.), *The Inferno of Dante* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

7. This de-privileging of the traditional gods can also be observed in the thought of the Hellenic Platonists, who more and more focused on the first principle over and above the traditional gods, which latter, nevertheless, were believed to exist. On this, see John Peter Kenny, *The Mysticism of St. Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17–20. To support this view Kenny also cites John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

8. See Jean-Marc Narbonne, “Levinas and the Greek Heritage” (pp. 1–96), followed by Wayne Hankey, “One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History” (pp. 97–248), in *Studies in Philosophical Theology* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006).

9. Peter Habermehl, “*Quaedam divinae potestates*: Demonology in Apuleius’ *De Deo Socratis*,” in *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1996), 117–42, at 134–35.

One must not dismiss the incorporation of demonology into purely rational philosophy as unenlightened superstition, or as an attempt merely to pay 'lip service' to traditional religion. Rather, Platonic demonology is grounded within and explained by philosophy herself.

For all his criticisms of the pagans, Augustine nevertheless maintains that demons and other spiritual beings exist, and that they possess, in a way superior to that of humans, a kind of being, knowledge, and agency. According to Augustine, angels and demons are natural creatures belonging to a particular species with its own properties and limitations.¹⁰ Augustine adheres to what he identifies as the general Platonic tripartite division of the cosmos: "All living beings, they say, in whom dwells a rational soul, are divided into three categories, namely gods, men and demons [...]. The gods dwell in heaven, men on earth, and demons in the air."¹¹ Apuleius asserts that demonic beings reside in their own section of the sublunary realm, the realm of air, located between the highest peak of Olympus and the lowest orbit of the moon. Below Olympus are located the realms of water and earth, the latter being that where humans reside. Habermehl points out that according to the demonic taxonomy of Apuleius, "air is not only [...] [the demons'] location and dominion; it is also the material of which they are composed."¹² The ontological nature of the bodies of demons is cognate with the nature of the level of the cosmos in which they reside. Apuleius writes, "grant then that the bodies of these *daemones* possess both a modicum of weight, so that they do not ascend to the supernal regions, and some lightness, so that they do not fall to the infernal ones."¹³ The bodies of demons are a kind of condensation, much more diffuse than clouds, which accounts for the human's inability to see them.¹⁴ The demons are median between gods and men according to both the composition of their bodies and their allotted realm.

It is important to emphasise here that for Augustine, neither demons nor angels are purely spiritual or intelligible substances. Like humans, demons

10. See Russell, 209–18, especially footnote 51. See also *civ. Dei* 18.18, and Evans, 99–100.

11. *civ. Dei* 8.14: "Omnium, inquit, animalium in quibus est anima rationalis tripartita divisio est, in deos, homines, daemones [...] Nam deorum sedes in caelo est, hominum in terra, in aere daemonum." For the English and Latin text I use Augustine, *City of God*, trans. David Wiesen, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968–2003).

12. Habermehl, 120.

13. *De Deo Socratis* 9: "habeant igitur haec daemonum corpora et modicum ponderis, ne ad superna in<s>cedant, aliquid levitatis, ne ad inferna praecipitentur." I use the text in *The Unknown Socrates: Translations, with Introductions and Notes, of Four Important Documents in the Late Antique Reception of Socrates the Athenian*, ed. William M. Calder III et al. (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy Carducci Publishers, 2002). For the text in Latin I use Apuleius, *De Deo Socratis: Apulei Platonici Madaurensis opera quae supersunt*, ed. Moreschini (coll. "De philosophia libri"), 1991.

14. See *De Deo Socratis* 10. Also, the souls of demons, like those of humans, rest upon the *pneuma*, or vehicle with which the soul controls the body, whatever kind of body that might be.

and angels have bodies and souls. Again, this is in keeping with the Platonic demonologies with which Augustine is engaging. For example, Porphyry distinguishes the demonic soul from its body, identifying the latter with the *pneuma* or “breath” on or in which its soul resides.¹⁵ Unlike the soul, the pneumatic substance is corporeal. A demon becomes good or evil depending on the ability of its soul to control its *pneuma*. Plato in *Timaeus* 43a claims that the body of the soul is “in a state of perpetual influx and efflux.” Porphyry follows Plato here, claiming that “the *pneuma*, insofar as it is corporeal, is passible and corruptible.”¹⁶ The good demons “control [the *pneuma*] according to reason,” (κρατούσι δὲ αὐτὸ κατὰ λόγον) whereas the evil demons are slaves to it.¹⁷

The complexities of the ancient demonic taxonomies demonstrate the misleading simplicity of understanding the Platonists as dualists. Why the Platonists were ever called dualists is a mystery to me—as if they thought that the human being and the cosmos within which it lives were composed of (as the term demands) *two* things.¹⁸ The Platonists, and the ancients in general, were much more sophisticated than this, and conceived the cosmos as comprising a highly stratified and multifarious hierarchy of Being. Their outlook is much more complex and their theories more nuanced than what one generally finds in contemporary philosophical treatments of the so-called ‘mind/body problem.’ One can be more or less particular and specific about *kinds* of dualisms present in Plato, but it is perhaps more prudent to abandon the notion altogether as foreign to his thought. Smith observes that, “Being invisible [...] is not the same as being immaterial—and no ancient demon

15. See *De Abſtinentia* 2.38–39. I use the text in Porphyry, *On Abſtinance From Killing Animals*, trans. Gillian Clark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). For the text in Greek I use Porphyrius, *Philosophi Platonici: Oscula Selecta*, ed. Augustus Navck et al. (coll. “Biblioteca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana”), 1963.

16. *De Abſtinentia* 2.39.2. See also Smith, 483–90.

17. *De Abſtinentia* 2.38.2. The distinction between the demonologies of Apuleius and Porphyry is qualitative, not merely linguistic. Porphyry is aware of the confusion that arises when different names are applied to the same gods. Discussing the difference between gods and the angels, Porphyry asks, “Why then do we argue about a name? Are we to take it as a difference about semantics? For the goddess the Greeks call Athene, the Romans call Minerva, and the Egyptians Cypris, and the Thracians call her by some other name. Thus, by these different names nothing is annulled concerning the significance of the gods. The difference is not vast whether one calls them gods or angels.” *Macarius Magnes* fr. 207 Apokritikos, 4.21. I use the text in Robert Berchman, *Porphyry Against the Christians: Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). The distinction between Porphyry’s and Augustine’s positions on the ontological status of demons, however, is often merely linguistic on many points.

18. For example, see Luc Brisson, “Between Matter and Body Mass (ὄγκος) in the *Sentences* of Porphyry,” *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 4 (2010): 36–53, in which the author points to at least four different levels of Being. One could argue that there are as many as six discernible aspects involved in the being of a human being in Plato’s *Timaeus*.

was immaterial, in the way we use the word since Descartes. The demons who roamed the late ancient world as a matter of course could not in practice be reduced to pure mind, *res cogitans*.¹⁹ Whatever Cartesian understanding of dualism a modern or contemporary might have, reading Platonic and demonological texts with this notion in mind confuses and conceals much more than it clarifies and reveals.

For Augustine, the ontological characteristics essential to demons are their aerial bodies and their long lifespans. Throughout his works, Augustine most often points to these intrinsic qualities as indicative of demonic nature.²⁰ Their aerial bodies grant to demons keen perception and celerity of movement. Augustine writes in the *De Divinatione Daemonum*, “The nature of demons is such that, through the sense perception belonging to the aerial body, they readily surpass the perception possessed by earthly bodies, and in speed, too, because of the superior mobility of the aerial body, they incomparably excel not only the movements of men and of beasts but even the flight of birds.”²¹ In the *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine introduces a more detailed account of the ontological status of demons, wherein he is in agreement with Apuleius, who asserted that “*daemones* are a class of animals, rational in nature, subject to emotion, airy in body, and eternal in time. Of these five factors which I have listed, the first three are the very ones we possess, the fourth is their own, and the last they share with the immortal gods.”²² For Apuleius, demons are median between gods and men according to their location, physical nature, and level of intelligence. They are similar to the gods according to their eternity, and similar to men according to their passions. The median nature of demons is a particular piece of Platonic orthodoxy that has its roots in Plato’s *Symposium*.²³ Augustine summarizes Apuleius’ demonology, recounting that, according to Apuleius, demons are “animal in genus, affected by emotions,

19. Smith, 481–82.

20. See Augustine, *Treatises on Marriage*, footnote 1, 426 in Saint Augustine, *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 27, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1955).

21. *divin. daem.* 3.7: “*Daemonum ea est natura, ut aerii corporis sensu terrenorum corporum sensum facile praecedant; celeritate etiam propter eiusdem aerii corporis superiorem mobilitatem non solum cursus quorumlibet hominum vel ferarum, verum etiam volatus avium incomparabiliter vincant.*” I use the text in Saint Augustine, *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari. For the text in Latin I use Augustin, *Mélanges Doctrinaux*, in *Oeuvres De Saint Augustin*, 1re Série: Opuscules, vol. 10 (Desclée De Brouwer, 1952).

22. *De Deo Socratis* 13: “*quippe, ut fine comprehendam, daemones sunt genere animalia, ingenio rationabilia, animo passiva, corpore aëria, tempore aeterna. ex his quinque, quae commemoravi, tria a principio eadem quae nobis, quartum proprium, postremum commune cum diis immortalibus habent.*”

23. Cf. *Symp.* 202d–203b.

rational in intelligence, aerial in body, and eternal in time.”²⁴ The first and third of these characteristics the demons share with gods and with humans; humans, demons, and gods are all rational animals according to Apuleius, and Augustine here does not disagree with the summation. Demons and humans are both, unlike God, affected by emotions. For Augustine, while the demons are eternal in time, so too are human souls, even if the latter do suffer the death of the flesh.²⁵ Both demons and men, however, are creatures, and thus, have beginnings in time. The aerial nature of the bodies of demons is the only property of these five listed that the demons alone possess.²⁶

In Augustine’s view, demons are not spiritual substances. Smith’s account of the physicality of demons is correct, against the view of Evans who suggests that “There was general agreement that demons were disembodied beings, dwelling in the air above us.”²⁷ It is difficult to see how, given the complex discussions of the nature of demonic bodies in the Platonic texts, one could conclude that demons were thought to be disembodied. The most one could say is that their bodies are of a nature different from that of human bodies. Augustine’s position is evident in his comments concerning the captain of the demons, Lucifer himself. In the *De Trinitate* Augustine writes that the devil, “bare indeed in his ungodliness the death of the spirit, but had not undergone the death of the flesh, because he had not assumed the covering of the flesh.”²⁸ And further, “whereas [...] [those who deny Christ] are better

24. *civ. Dei* 8.16: “*ait daemones esse genere animalia, animo passiva, mente rationalia, corpore aëria, tempore aeterna.*”

25. Whether or not Augustine takes a strong position on the death or destruction of the demonic body is unclear. Porphyry is clear that although the demonic body endures much longer than does the human body, the former being aerial and the latter being of flesh, because the *pneuma* is corporeal and composite it will necessarily decompose in time. See *De Abinentia* 2.39. Augustine seems to indicate that the aerial body is eternal and does not die as does the human body. However, one might also argue that there is a sense in which the human body, that is, the resurrected body, also is eternal.

26. See also *civ. Dei* 8.22: “On the contrary we should believe that they are spirits fanatically bent on doing harm, completely at odds with justice, swollen with pride, green with envy and well practiced in deceit, who live, it is true in our air, but do so because they were cast out from the lofty regions of the higher heavens and were condemned in the beginning to dwell in this region, which is, as it were, a prison appropriate to their nature, in just punishment for a transgression from which there is no retreat”; “*sed esse spiritus nocendi cupidissimos, a iustitia penitus alienos, superbia tumidos, invidentia lividos, fallacia callidos, qui in hoc quidem aere habitant, quia de caeli superioris sublimitate deiecti merito inaccessibilis transgressionis in hoc sibi congruo velut carcere praedammati sunt.*”

27. Evans, 101. Cf. Smith, 481–82.

28. *Trin.* 4.10.13: “*mortem quippe spiritus in impietate gestebat, sed mortem carnis non subierat, quia nec indumentum susceperat.*” I use the text in Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st Series, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Michigan: B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956). For the text in Latin I use Augustin, *La Trinité*, in *Oeuvres De Saint Augustin*, 2^{me} Série: Dieu et Son Oeuvre, vol. 15 (Desclée De Brouwer, 1955).

than the devils, yet because they bear a body of flesh, they can so die, as the devils certainly cannot die, who do not bear such a body.”²⁹ Not having a body of flesh does not, however, protect the demons from being physically tormented, either in this life or in the hereafter, since “a death of another kind is prepared in the eternal fire of hell, by which not only the spirits that have earthly, *but also those who have aerial bodies*, can be tormented.”³⁰ Though the angels, the fallen of which are now called demons, were created before human beings and do not have bodies of flesh that die, the eternality of their souls is no different from that which the human soul enjoys.³¹ According to Augustine, demons and men were created by God, and their souls will live on eternally at the end of time, whether that be in heavenly bliss or infernal damnation. Augustine’s position emphasises not the difference and separation between demons and men, as though the former cannot affect the later, but rather Augustine holds that demons, because they are embodied, are very much in the world and can affect it and the human body corporeally. How else could Satan tell the Lord that he has just come “from going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it”?³²

III. DEMONIC EPISTEMOLOGY

At this point, I shall finally address the title of this paper. Those who recognise the quotation in the title might already anticipate the epistemological connection I wish to draw. “You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive,” are the first words of Sherlock Holmes to Dr. Watson upon their first meeting.³³ Watson is initially astonished at this pronouncement, believing Holmes to possess some kind of superhuman, supernatural, or miraculous power. Of course Watson had indeed been in Afghanistan, and later assumes that Holmes was told this detail. In fact, Holmes was not told, though it is not until the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet* that he reveals the ordinary nature of his deduction:

Here is a gentleman of a medical type, but with the air of a military man. Clearly an army doctor, then. He has just come from the tropics, for his face is dark, and that is not the natural tint of his skin, for his wrists are fair. He has undergone hardship and

29. *Trin.* 4.13.18: “*Sic cum sint ipsi daemonibus meliores, tamen quia carnem portant, mori sic possunt, quae admodum mori daemones, qui non eam portant, non utique possunt.*”

30. *Trin.* 4.13.18: “*A morte autem carnis alieno diabolo, unde nimium superbus incedit, mors alterius generis praeparatur in aeterno igne tartari, quo non solum cum terrenis, sed etiam cum aereis corporibus excruciaci spiritus possint*” (my emphasis). On why there is no salvation for the Devil and his demons, even though they have not suffered the death of the flesh, cf. *Tractate* 110.7.

31. On the creation of angels, see Evans, 99.

32. Job 1:7.

33. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Works of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1992), 18.

sickness, as his haggard face says clearly. His left arm has been injured. He holds it in a stiff and unnatural manner. Where in the tropics could an English army doctor have seen much hardship and got his arm wounded? Clearly in Afghanistan.’ The whole train of thought did not occupy a second. Then I remarked that you came from Afghanistan, and you were astonished.³⁴

Once Watson, and the reader, hears the explanation surrounding Holmes’ seemingly wondrous insight, the miraculous makes way for the mundane. The explanation of the steps of the deduction demystify Holmes’ abilities, which, in the end, require no special power beyond what any other human is capable of doing, given the proper training. As Watson puts it, “It is simple enough as you explain it.”³⁵ In fact, the demystification leaves in its wake a kind of disappointment, akin to what one feels when one, despite his initial anxiety and desire to know, is shown how the magic trick was performed—the wizard is revealed to be a man behind a curtain.

Augustine’s understanding of demonic agency, and in particular the demonic ability to perform what seem to be miracles, follows a similar logic. The miraculous nature of demonic activity is entirely demystified once one understands that demonic power follows naturally from demonic nature. Augustine argues that, given the keen perception and swift movement that demons possess in virtue of the nature of the aerial body and the long span of their lives, demons have knowledge beyond what the human can attain. In the *De Divinatione Daemonum* Augustine writes,

Endowed with these two faculties, in so far as they are the properties of the aerial body, namely, with keenness of perception and speed of movement, [demons] foretell and declare many things that they have recognized far in advance. At this, because of the sluggishness of earthly perception, men wonder. The demons, too, through the long period into which their life is extended, have gained a far greater experience in events than accrues to men because of the brief span of their lives. Through these faculties which the nature of the aerial body has allotted, demons not only foretell many things that will occur but also perform many miraculous acts. Since man can neither tell nor perform these things, certain individuals think it proper to serve the demons and to render them divine honors.³⁶

34. Conan Doyle, 24.

35. Conan Doyle, 24.

36. *divin. daem.* 3.7: “*Quibus duabus rebus quantum ad aereum corpus attinet praediti, hoc est, acrimonia sensus et celeritate motus, multa ante cognita praenuntiant vel nuntiant, quae homines pro sensus terreni tarditate mirentur. Accessit etiam daemonibus per tam longum tempus quo eorum vita protenditur, rerum longe major experientia, quam potest hominibus propter brevitatem vitae provenire. Per has efficacias quas aerei corporis natura sortita est, non solum multa futura praedicunt daemones, verum etiam multa mira faciunt. Quae quoniam homines dicere ac facere non possunt, eos dignos quidam quibus serviant et quibus divinos honores deferant.*”

In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine provides other examples of animals that have keener sensation and swifter movement than those of humans. Though the fish's ability to breathe in water, the bird's flight, and the leopard's speed are wondrous to humans lacking such abilities, these feats are in no way supernatural.³⁷ That is, they are not above or beyond nature; in fact, they are *precisely* natural. Given demonic ontology, epistemology, and agency, their 'miracles' are explainable by biology, physics, and the other physical sciences.³⁸ For example, taking advantage of the aerial nature of their bodies, demons can be in places that men cannot. They can move quickly from place to place to foretell the weather, or to predict the arrival of an approaching visitor. Smith writes that St. Antony's

hard-won inside information [...] enabled him to expose the demons' frequent recourse to deception and fraud. There was nothing miraculous about their supposed predictions of the future, once he explained to fellow monks, especially those 'prophecies' where they seemed to foretell the arrival of visitors. The real explanation was simple and mechanistic. The demons simply exploited the advantages of their material constitution.³⁹

Evans writes: "In this 'hierarchical' arrangement it seems as though the demons or devils are in some sense 'better' than men, because they have immortal bodies, and because they dwell in a higher place. Augustine will have none of this."⁴⁰ It is important to realise, however, that when considering only the nature of the body and physical abilities, Augustine is in fact in *absolute agreement* with this. Evans is correct to point out that Augustine does not believe that demons should be worshipped because of this ontological superiority, and that moral character is more important than one's physical abilities, but she is wrong to imply that Augustine disagrees with this ontological summation. It is precisely because of the ontological superiority of demons that they are able to perform deeds that appear miraculous relative to humans lacking such abilities.

The difference between demonic and human knowledge is a matter of degree, not of kind. Augustine explains the difference by comparing the knowledge of men skilled in certain *tekne* to that of men unskilled in the same arts. Augustine writes, "Yet sometimes [demons] foretell, not the deeds which they themselves perform, but future events which they recognize in advance through natural signs which cannot reach the senses of men. Surely, because the physician foresees the outcomes that one ignorant of his art does

37. See *civ. Dei* 8.15: "*Quis hominum videndo aequabitur aquilis et vulturibus? Quis odorando canibus? Quis velocitate leporibus, cervis, omnibus avibus?*"

38. Demonology, under this view, could be considered a science.

39. Smith, 504–05.

40. Evans, 102.

not foresee, one need not for that reason esteem him divine.”⁴¹ Just as a sailor is better able than the tailor to read the warnings forecasted by the wind and sky, so too is the demon, residing in the very air itself, even better equipped to do the same. Augustine also claims that demons can with greater accuracy than that discernible by the human being know the inner thoughts of the mind. Augustine writes, “Finally, too, with all ease they discern the intentions of men, not only as they are expressed by the voice, but also as they are conceived in reflection, when certain individual phases of the mind are expressed in the body. These disclosures are truly miraculous to those who do not know the acts intended.”⁴² Further, “These cannot be recognized by the dull sense of men, but can be through the keen perception of demons.”⁴³ Of course the human being can do this as well—the one who wins the poker hand is not always he who has the best cards, but he who can determine, through calculated estimation and by reading his ‘tell,’ which cards his opponent holds. There is nothing miraculous about the demon’s ability to do the same. In virtue of its bodily character it is just better at it, in the same way that the cheetah is swifter than a man. Demonic knowledge is like that possessed by Sherlock Holmes, or that popularised by characters in the contemporary television programs *Lie to Me* and *The Mentalist*.

Because demonic knowledge is mundane and achieved through natural means, it is liable to error. According to Augustine, demons do not possess perfect knowledge, unlike angels. Angels have perfect knowledge, not because of their natures, which they share entirely with their fallen brethren, but because they look towards and abide in God. Augustine writes: “[the demons]

41. *divin. daem.* 5.9: “*Aliquando autem non quae ipsi faciunt, sed quae naturalibus signis futura praenoscunt, quae signa in hominum sensus venire non possunt, ante praedicunt. Neque enim quia praevideat medicus quod non praevideat eius artis ignarus, ideo iam divinus habendus est.*”

42. *divin. daem.* 5.9: “*Aliquando et hominum dispositiones, non solum voce prolatas, verum etiam cogitatione conceptas, cum signa quaedam ex animo exprimuntur in corpore, tota facilitate perdiscunt: atque hinc etiam multa futura praenuntiant, aliis videlicet mira, qui ista disposita non noverunt.*” In the same text and in *div. qu.* Augustine wonders whether the demon, due to its aerial nature, can enter into a human body to observe the imprints of thoughts on the mind. Such signs might not only be external signs, but through entering the body the internal signs become external to the possessing demon. In the *Retractions*, Augustine qualifies this position a little, and leaves open the possibility of there being a more arcane, supernatural demonic power: “I spoke on a very obscure subject with more daring asseveration than I should; for it has been discovered, through certain actual experiences, that such thoughts come to the knowledge of demons. But whether certain signs, perceptible to them but hidden from us, are given by the body of men when they are reflecting, or whether they learn these things through another power and that a spiritual one, men can ascertain either with the greatest difficulty or not at all” (*retr.* 2.56). I use the text in Augustine, *The Retractions*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 60, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968).

43. *divin. daem.* 5.9: “*quae obtuso sensu hominum cognosci non possunt, acuto autem daemonum possunt.*”

do foresee many more future events than we do by their greater acquaintance with certain signs that are hidden from men. Sometimes too they announce in advance events that they themselves intend to bring about. Consequently the demons are often mistaken.”⁴⁴ Further, “They make some mistakes, too, in regard to natural phenomena. Like doctors, sailors, and farmers, they prognosticate, but demons do this far more keenly and far more excellently through the more alert and active perception of their aerial bodies. The demons make mistakes [...]”⁴⁵ Demonic knowledge and agency would be entirely explainable given the nature, powers, and limitations of their species.

IV. THE MIRACULOUS AND THE MUNDANE: DEMONIC AGENCY

Before turning to agency, something must now be said concerning miracles and nature in Augustine in order to provide a context for judging the character of demonic miracles. Matthew Dickie writes:

The Christian view of magic in this period is not a consistent one: sometimes it is maintained that there is a reality to what magic seems to accomplish and on other occasions that reality is denied and we are told that it is just an illusion engineered either by slight of hand or by demons. There is, nonetheless, general agreement that the effects of magic, whether illusion or reality, are the work of the Devil and the demons of whom he is the leader.⁴⁶

For Augustine, both options are true. Sometimes the effects of magic and demons are illusions, but sometimes they accomplish actual effects, and by this measure, demonic agency is very real.⁴⁷ Evans argues that Augustine’s position is that “just as demons only ‘appear’ to be able to reveal things beyond our understanding, so it is only ‘apparently’ that they can affect events.”⁴⁸ She continues: “they only *seem* to have power,” and “the effect devils have is a mere appearance. The signs they do are empty (*nugatoria*), fancied, not real (*imaginaria signa*), and they are therefore misleading.”⁴⁹ While it is true

44. *civ. Dei* 9.2: “*sed quorundam signorum nobis occultorum maiore experientia multo plura quam homines futura prospiciunt; dispositiones quoque suas aliquando praenuntiant. Denique saepe isti, numquam illi omnino falluntur.*”

45. *divin. daem.* 6.10: “*Falluntur etiam cum causis naturalibus aliqua, sicut medici, aut nautae, aut agricolae, sed longe acutius longeque praestantius pro aërii corporis sensu solertiore et exercitatore praenoscent [...].*”

46. Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 273–74.

47. See for example *civ. Dei* 8.13: “*Quorum vis non eos indicate nullos, sed iste affectus nimirum indicate malos*”; “Their power shows that they are not non-existent, but their passion for such things certainly shows that they are evil.”

48. Evans, 106.

49. Evans, 106, 107.

that Augustine believes that demons have the power to affect human senses, to cloud their minds, and to deceive them into thinking and sensing things that are neither real, nor actually happen, he absolutely does not believe that this is all they can do. As we have seen, they can actually reveal things beyond human understanding.⁵⁰ Evans' position stems from the incorrect view that the demons are disembodied and physically separate from human beings.⁵¹ One of the limits of Evans' treatment of Augustine's demonology is that she seems to take into account neither Augustine's *De Trinitate* nor his *De Divinatione Daemonum*. As we have seen, neither Augustine nor the tradition within which he is engaged believe that demons cannot affect the physical world. They are just as much in and part of nature as is the human being. In what follows, I shall argue against Evans' position by looking closely at Augustine's own texts.

Augustine is disdainful of magic in all its forms. Whether it operates under the guise of "the more hateful name, witchcraft [*goetia*] or, using a more honourable one, theurgy," magic invokes the demons, who, for Augustine, are all deceitful, vain, and evil.⁵² Augustine's understanding of the demons as solely evil entities in the *De Civitate Dei* stems from his philosophical problems with both the definition of them propounded by Apuleius and the questions raised by Porphyry in the *Letter to Anebo*. The succours that are attributed to the 'good' demons by the various magical and Neoplatonic traditions are, for Augustine, not carried out by demons at all, but rather by angels, which, again, are of the same species as are demons. Not only do demons act of their own accord, but also magicians can achieve their own ends through demonic aid either by compelling demons or by entering with them into pacts or contracts.⁵³ Augustine claims that the practitioners of both *goetia* and theurgy "are devotees of the fraudulent rites of demons masquerading under the names of angels."⁵⁴ Augustine finds the distinction between these beings in Scripture, in which "we read [...] sometimes of good angels and sometimes of bad angels, but never of good demons; but whenever in Scripture we find this noun in the text [...] it refers only to malign spirits."⁵⁵ Furthermore, according to Augustine, by his time, "almost every

50. Whether or not such revelations are meant to succour or lead astray, however, is another matter.

51. See Evans, 104.

52. *civ. Dei* 10.9: "*detestabiliore nomine goetian vel honorabiliore theurgian.*"

53. Cf. *doc. Chr.* 2.74–95.

54. *civ. Dei* 10.9: "*cum sint utriusque ritibus fallacibus daemonum obstricti sub nominibus angelorum.*"

55. *civ. Dei* 9.19: "*Nos autem, sicut scriptura loquitur secundum quam Christiani sumus, angelos quidem partim bonos, partim malos, numquam vero bonos daemones legimus; sed ubicumque illarum litterarum hoc nomen positum reperitur [...] non nisi maligni significatur spiritus.*" Cf. also

one” understands the word ‘*daemon*’ to have a solely negative connotation.⁵⁶

Augustine uses the word ‘miracle’ (*miraculum*) in a number of different senses. In one sense, he identifies as miracles those events or effects whose causes, while entirely natural and explainable according to physical laws, are unknown to humans. For example:

If, then, very many effects can be contrived by human art, of so surprising a kind that the uninitiated think them divine, as when, e.g., in a certain temple two magnets have been adjusted, one in the roof, another in the floor, so that an iron image is suspended in mid-air between them, one would suppose by the power of the divinity, were he ignorant of the magnets above and beneath.⁵⁷

One ignorant of the magnets observing this event certainly would, as the word ‘miracle’ suggests, ‘wonder at’ what he sees. In *De Civitate Dei* Augustine provides numerous examples of other wondrous things he has seen and heard of, in a way reminiscent of Aristotle’s *De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus* (*On Marvellous Things Heard*), and concludes that in these things, “though there seems to be an extraordinary property contrary to nature, yet no other reason is given for them than this, that this is their nature—a brief reason truly, and, I own, a satisfactory reply.”⁵⁸

When Augustine speaks of demons working miracles, he means this in the sense in which Spinoza uses the term when he writes of the ‘unknown law’. According to Driscoll, Spinoza “taught that the term *miracle* should be understood with reference to the opinions of men, and that it means simply an event which we are unable to explain by other events familiar to our experience [...]”⁵⁹ He continues, “thus Prof. Cooper writes “The miracle of one age becomes the ordinary working of nature in the next.”⁶⁰ The conclusion is that “a miracle never happened in fact, and is only a name to cover our ignorance.”⁶¹ Ignorance of a cause, however, does not a true miracle make.

Augustine writes in the *De Trinitate*: “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

civ. Dei 10.1: “What I have to do now, as God grants me power, is to consider and discuss principalities and powers, whom the Platonists call gods and to some of whom they give the name either of good demons, or, as we do, of angels.”

56. *civ. Dei* 10.9.

57. *civ. Dei* 21.6.

58. *civ. Dei* 21.7.

59. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles Herbermann (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913), s.v. “Miracle.”

60. Qtd. in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Miracle.” Cf. also Chapter VI of Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*.

61. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Miracle.”

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.”⁶² This “unusual changeableness” is either a result of the human’s inability to discern the cause of the effect, or is the result of a true miracle. Augustine of course argues, against the position Spinoza would adopt, that there are indeed true miracles, which are wrought only by God, either directly or through his angels.

Augustine’s position is that demons perform relative miracles, that is, their marvels are wondered at by humans, who often take their abilities and knowledge to be supernatural, when in fact, demonic activity is bound by the laws of nature. Augustine writes, “For it is one thing to guess at temporal matters from temporal, and changeable matters from changeable, and to introduce into them the temporal and changeable workings of one’s own will and capacity, and this is a thing that the demons may do within fixed limits.”⁶³ The demon’s ability to move quickly and unseen, to affect objects, and perhaps even enter into human bodies, is subject to rational explanation according to natural principles and limits.⁶⁴ Even the best science fiction must operate within a given structure or order, however fantastic or unknown that order might be.

Augustine elucidates the nature of demonic agency by drawing an analogy between it and human activity. Driscoll writes:

Man controls nature, nay, can live only by the counteraction of natural forces. Though all this goes on around us, we never speak of natural forces violated. These forces are still working after their kind, and no force is destroyed, nor is any law broken, nor does confusion result. The introduction of human will may bring about a displacement of the physical forces, but no infraction of physical processes.⁶⁵

The same is true for demons according to Augustine. He writes in the *De Divinatione Daemonum* that demons “not only predict some future events, but even perform certain miracles, assuredly *through that actual superiority of the body*.”⁶⁶ In the same text, he adds, “Moreover, how effective is the element

62. *Trin.* 3.6: “*Sed cum fiunt illa continuato quasi quodam fluvio labentium manantiumque rerum, et ex occulto, in promptum, atque ex prompto in occultum usitato itinere transeuntium, naturalia dicuntur: cum vero admonendis hominibus inusitata mutabilitate ingeruntur, magnalia nominantur.*”

63. *civ. Dei* 9.22: “*Aliud est enim temporalibus et mutabilibus mutabilia coniectare eisque temporalem et mutabilem modum suae voluntatis et facultatis inserere, quod daemonibus certa ratione permissum est.*”

64. See *retr.* 2.56 and *div. qu.* 79.

65. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Miracle.”

66. *divin. daem.* 4.8: “*Quod vero non solum daemones quaedam futura praedicunt, verum etiam quaedam mira faciunt, pro ipsa utique sui corporis excellentia [...]*” (my emphasis).

of air, in which their bodies surpass, to produce invisibly many visible results, to move, to change, and to overthrow is too long a story to set forth below. I think that it will occur readily to one who deliberates even moderately.⁶⁷ It is clear from this text alone that Augustine does not limit demonic agency to the creation of illusions. If this were his view, the Amazing Kreskin would be more powerful than Lucifer, for he can both seemingly produce a nickel from one's ear and actually tie his shoes, whereas Lucifer should only be capable of the former. Rather, humans and demons, being natural creatures, are in the same position; to use Driscoll's term, demons are able to bring about greater 'displacement' of natural forces than are humans, given the former's ontological superiority, though both species are bound by the same laws of nature.

John Dillon once remarked that he thought Augustine was dubious of the efficacy of theurgy, among a host of other reasons, because of its mechanistic quality: if one performs the right actions in the correct ways (whatever they might have been), the desired outcome would necessarily occur. It seems, however, that Augustine believes *exactly this* happens in the case of magic and sorcery. He is not dubious about their effectiveness at all, but rather he fears the more important effects that demonic pacts have on the soul and moral character of the magician. In the *De Diversis Quaestionibus*, Augustine refers to an episode in the Gospel of Luke 9:49, in which the apostles question Jesus about a man who, though not a follower of Christ, is able to cast out demons in Jesus' name. Augustine writes:

And so magicians perform miracles in one way, good Christians in another and bad Christians in yet another: magicians through private pacts, good Christians through public righteousness and bad Christians through the signs of public righteousness. It is not surprising that these signs have validity when they are used by them since, thanks to the honour of the most excellent emperor, they continue to have validity even when they are usurped by strangers who have not so much as enrolled in the army.⁶⁸

Often these deeds cause negative effects. In the *De Divinatione Daemonum* Augustine writes, "It must be admitted that even those evil deeds which are

67. *divin. daem.* 4.8: "*Quantum autem valeat aeris elementum, quo eorum corpora praevalent, ad multa visibilia invisibiliter molienda, movenda, mutanda atque versanda, longum est nunc demonstrare; et puto quod vel mediocriter consideranti facile occurrat.*"

68. *div. qu.* 79.4: "*Quapropter aliter magi faciunt miracula, aliter boni christiani, aliter mali christiani: magi per privatos contractus, boni christiani per publicam justitiam, mali christiani per signa publicae justitiae. Nec mirum est quod haec signa valent, cum ab eis adhibentur: quando etiam cum usurpantur ab extraneis, qui onimmo suum nomen ad istam militiam non dederunt, propter honorem tamen excellentissimi Imperatoris valent.*" For the text in English I use Augustine, *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, ed. Raymond Canning (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2008). For the text in Latin I use Augustin, *Mélanges Doctrinaux*, in *Oeuvres De Saint Augustin*, Ire Série: Opuscules, vol. 10 (Desclée De Brouwer, 1952).

committed in opposition to the religion by which God is worshiped both displease a just God and are permitted in the order of His judgment by an omnipotent God.”⁶⁹ Augustine, finding the authority for this in Job, holds that demons are only allowed to do the evil that God permits; demons can only do what they do “by power given from above.”⁷⁰ Ultimately, nothing occurs in nature that God does not allow, for there is no power outside of nature, no being outside of God’s creation that could enter into the universe and alter it contrary to God’s will.⁷¹ What Augustine wants to emphasise here, however, is that even when the proper mechanistic actions are taken, sometimes God does prevent the outcome from happening. When these actions do not work, and “the powers of this sort do not yield to these signs, God himself restrains them in secret ways when he judges that to be just and advantageous.”⁷² Any act or event that seems to transgress natural laws is either a true miracle, and thus a work of God, an illusion created by demons, or the result of human inability to discern the actual, though natural, (and possibly demonic) causes at work.

Surely relative miracles are to be wondered at by certain people, but the miraculous becomes mundane when its natural causes and principles are laid bare. We ought, therefore, to try as far as we are able to determine their causes and effects in nature. For Augustine writes that “those things which are done

69. *divin. daem.* 2.6: “*fatendumque esse etiam illa mala quae contra religionem qua colitur Deus fiunt, et displicere Deo justo, et ratione iudicii eius ab omnipotente permitti.*” Evans uses this point, which Augustine also makes in *civ. Dei*, to suggest that demons only ‘apparently’ affect events, whereas humans can actually do so (Evans, 106). However, there is no reason to think that there is any distinction between human and demonic agency in relation to God’s providence. It is just as true for humans as it is for demons that “they can do nothing to alter the course of events unless God permits” (*ibid.*). Humans and demons alike have free will. Again, the distinction, which aims to separate demonic agency from the physical world, is false.

70. *Trin.* 3.7. Cf. *Trin.* 4.11.14: “For it is easy for the most worthless spirits to do many things by means of aerial bodies, such as to cause wonder to souls which are weighed down by earthly bodies, even though they be of the better inclined”; “*Facile est enim spiritibus nequissimis per aerea corpora facere multa, quae mirentur animae terrenis corporibus aggravatae, etiam melioris affectus.*” Cf. also *civ. Dei* 8.24: “we must conclude that what power they have is merely their demonic power, either when in pretending to confer kindness they do the more harm as their fraud is greater, or when they openly do us hurt, although anything hurtful that they do and the time when they do it are only as permitted by the deep and mysterious will of God”; “*restat ut quod possunt tamquam daemones possint, vel quasi beneficia praestando magis nocentes, quia magis decipientes, vel aperte malefaciendo—nec tamen quodlibet horum, nisi quando permittuntur alta et secreta Dei providentia.*”

71. This is the line of reasoning followed by Nebridius in Augustine’s *Confessions* which allowed Augustine to overcome the contradictions inherent in the corporeal dualism of the Manichees.

72. *div. qu.* 79.4: “*Cum autem non cedunt his signis huiusmodi potestates, Deus ipse prohibet occultis modis, cum id iustum atque utile iudicat.*”

by angels are the more wonderful to us, in that they are more difficult and more unknown,” and “There is a wide difference between the deed of the angel and the deed of the man. The former is both to be wondered at and to be understood, the latter only to be understood.”⁷³

The demons, for Augustine, have no power to create. All things are created by God, and thus the demons are unable to thwart God’s physical creation or to twist it towards perverse ends. Even for the demons, evil arises neither out of matter itself, nor from their bodies, but from a deficiency in their wills. When discussing whether or not the demons can alter the physical forms of men or other created objects, Augustine concludes: “indeed the demons, if they really do such things as these on which the discussion turns, do not create real substances, but only change the appearance of things created by the true God so as to make them seem to be what they are not.”⁷⁴ Demons can only do what God allows, and this does not ever include the perversion or creation of matter. Only God creates *ex nihilo*: “Nor, in truth, are those evil angels to be called creators, because by their means the magicians, withstanding the servant of God, made frogs and serpents; for it was not they who created them. But, in truth, some hidden seeds of all things that are born corporeally and visibly, are concealed in the corporeal elements of this world.”⁷⁵ Demons can be the adventitious causes of natural processes that are hidden to the knowledge of men, whereby Augustine writes: “I can no more call the bad angels, evoked by magic arts, the creators of the frogs and serpents, than I can say that bad men were creators of the corn crop, which I see to have sprung up through their labor.”⁷⁶ Augustine here draws a concrete analogy between human and demonic activity whereby the difference between human and demonic agency is a matter of degree, not of kind. Evans’ position would have us believe that the corn is an illusion. But this is not what Augustine argues; the frogs and serpents are just as real as the corn, and neither humans nor demons create such things out of nothing, which is a power possessed only by God, but rather, both species manipulate matter

73. *Trin.* 3.10.20: “*Itaque illa quae per Angelos fiunt, quo difficiliora et ignotiora, eo mirabiliora sunt nobis*”; “*Inter factum angeli et factum hominis plurimum distat: illud et mirandum et intelligendum est, hoc autem tantummodo intelligendum.*”

74. *civ. Dei* 18.18.

75. *Trin.* 3.8.

76. *Trin.* 3.8. Cf. also *ibid.*: “As therefore we do not call the 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;—so it is not right to think not only the bad but even the good angels to be creators, if, through the subtlety of their perception and body, they know the seeds of things which to us are more hidden, and scatter them secretly through fit temperings of the elements, and so furnish opportunities of producing things, and of accelerating their increase.”

according to their respective physical powers and mental capacities to effect real change within the bounds of the laws of nature.

Whether the miracles of demons are illusions, whereby they do not really take place, or are actions in accord with natural physical laws, though hidden to men or beyond the capacities of the human body, creation for Augustine is sacrosanct. The physical world itself is neither evil nor deceptive. The evil will can use nature for evil purposes, but the evil then comes from the will, and not from matter itself. For all their ontological and epistemological superiority, not even the demons can radically alter nature. While we should be on greater guard against demonic attacks on our mental and moral constitutions than on our bodies, it is certainly not Augustine's position that "we need not fear what the demons can do to the outside world."⁷⁷ The scope of demonic influence extends even to this physical realm, a battlefield of that great perpetual war between men and demons who wander the earth for the ruin of souls.

77. Evans, 104.