

# PRETERNATURAL

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## Defining the Preternatural

The term **preternatural** refers to phenomena or occurrences that fall outside the established and currently understood natural laws governing existence. These events are anomalous, meaning they deviate significantly from the expected course of nature as described by contemporary scientific paradigms. Crucially, the preternatural is not synonymous with the impossible, but rather represents the boundary of the empirically known, suggesting mechanisms that are currently opaque to human understanding or technological measurement. The classification serves as a conceptual placeholder for events that are ostensibly natural--originating within the physical universe--yet defy immediate, ready explanation through existing theoretical frameworks in physics, biology, or psychology.

Etymologically derived from the Latin *praeter naturam*, meaning "beyond nature" or "beside nature," the term carries a specific semantic weight distinct from its common usage. In formal philosophical and scientific discourse, preternatural implies an extension of nature rather than a violation thereof. A preternatural event is perceived as being highly unusual, unexpected, or seemingly impossible given the current model of reality, but there remains the potential for eventual integration into a broader, more comprehensive scientific understanding. This classification often highlights the limitations of human knowledge at a specific historical moment, acting as a catalyst for inquiry into overlooked or undiscovered physical laws.

A classic historical example frequently cited to illustrate this concept is the behavior of fundamental particles before the formal establishment of quantum mechanics. At one time, observations concerning the dual wave-particle nature of light, or the seemingly instantaneous correlations between entangled particles, appeared preternatural. These behaviors could not be reconciled with classical Newtonian physics; they seemed to violate causality or localization. However, subsequent theoretical advancements and empirical validation demonstrated that these phenomena were not outside nature, but rather resided within a deeper, more complex layer of reality than previously mapped. The preternatural, therefore, is a dynamic category, perpetually shrinking as scientific knowledge expands.

## Distinction from the Supernatural

It is essential to maintain a rigorous distinction between the **preternatural** and the **supernatural**, a differentiation vital for intellectual honesty in empirical research. The preternatural implies phenomena that, while currently inexplicable, are assumed to be consistent with physical laws, even if those laws are yet to be discovered or fully articulated. The underlying premise is that these events operate through mechanisms intrinsic to the natural world and are thus susceptible to scientific investigation, measurement, and eventual integration into a naturalistic worldview. The preternatural is merely unexplained, whereas the supernatural is fundamentally non-physical.

In contrast, the **supernatural** refers to events that are defined by their permanent and inherent defiance of all known and potential physical laws. These phenomena are typically attributed to non-physical, metaphysical, or spiritual sources, such as divine intervention, magic, or pure volition outside the constraints of matter and energy. The supernatural, by its very definition, resides outside the scope of scientific inquiry because it is non-testable, non-repeatable in a controlled environment, and cannot be integrated into a coherent physical framework. To accept a phenomenon as supernatural is to accept a break in the causal chain of the physical universe, whereas accepting a phenomenon as preternatural is merely acknowledging the current incompleteness of our physical model.

This careful semantic boundary is critical within psychology and philosophy of mind. When evaluating purported anomalous experiences--such as claimed telepathy or psychokinesis--the researcher must first approach the event as potentially **preternatural**, seeking natural (though hidden) causes, complex environmental interactions, or misunderstood neurobiological processes. Only by exhausting all potential natural explanations, including those that demand radical shifts in current theory, can one begin to entertain the possibility of the supernatural, though empirical science generally resists crossing this threshold entirely due to methodological constraints. Maintaining this barrier ensures that the scientific method remains the primary tool for understanding observed reality.

## Historical Context and Philosophical Roots

The concept of the preternatural has deep historical roots, notably formalized within scholastic philosophy during the medieval period. Thinkers like Thomas Aquinas utilized the term to categorize events that were unusual and beyond the ordinary course of nature but were not considered direct miracles--the latter being reserved for immediate, supernatural acts of God. According to this framework, the preternatural allowed for events that operated through highly unusual or hidden natural causes that only God understood or permitted, serving as an intermediate ground between the mundane operations of nature and the wholly divine suspension of natural law. This classification provided intellectual space for phenomena such as demonic possession or unusual weather patterns that required explanation but did not fit neatly into the established natural cosmology.

The rise of the Enlightenment and the subsequent solidification of the mechanistic worldview dramatically altered the usage and relevance of the preternatural category. As science gained confidence in its ability to map and predict the physical world, the category of the preternatural began to shrink rapidly. Events previously classified as mysterious or hidden natural causes were either successfully explained (e.g., comets, diseases) and assimilated into the natural category, or they were dismissed as mere superstition, fraud, or misperception. For a time, the distinction between natural and supernatural became starker, leaving less room for the intermediate state of

the preternatural.

The term experienced a resurgence in the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly within the nascent fields of psychical research and parapsychology. Researchers attempting to study phenomena like spiritualism, telepathy, or clairvoyance sought to legitimize their work by classifying these events as **preternatural**. This approach allowed them to investigate these phenomena empirically, positing that they were manifestations of undiscovered physical forces, fields, or psychological capabilities that extended the known boundaries of nature, rather than relying on metaphysical or religious explanations. This historical application demonstrates the term's enduring utility as a tool for challenging established scientific boundaries.

## The Role of Scientific Paradigm Shifts

The existence of preternatural phenomena is intrinsically linked to the concept of scientific paradigms, as articulated by historian of science **Thomas S. Kuhn**. According to this framework, science operates within established paradigms--sets of fundamental theories, assumptions, and methodologies that define normal research. The preternatural often manifests as the accumulation of "anomalies" that cannot be reconciled with the prevailing paradigm. These anomalies are observations that repeatedly contradict the predictions of the current established theory, creating cognitive pressure within the scientific community.

When the number and severity of preternatural anomalies become overwhelming, they drive the field toward a scientific revolution or paradigm shift. For instance, the constant velocity of light, regardless of the observer's motion, was a preternatural anomaly within the Newtonian framework. It demanded a radical rethinking of space and time, ultimately leading to Einstein's theory of relativity. The preternatural, therefore, is not merely a label for the unexplained; it is a critical engine of scientific progress, forcing researchers to develop entirely new conceptual structures capable of encompassing the previously impossible observations.

However, the scientific process must treat claims of the preternatural with extreme caution. The history of science is rife with instances where purported preternatural phenomena were later revealed to be artifacts, experimental errors, or deliberate fabrications. Therefore, the standards for accepting a phenomenon as genuinely preternatural--meaning it reliably operates outside current laws--are exceptionally high, demanding robust, repeatable evidence that withstands rigorous scrutiny. The boundary between the natural and the preternatural is thus fiercely protected by methodological skepticism, preventing the category from becoming a refuge for unsubstantiated claims or wishful thinking.

## Preternatural Phenomena in Psychology and Perception

In the field of psychology, the concept of the preternatural applies primarily to unusual cognitive

states, perceptual anomalies, and claims of non-standard mental functioning. Researchers often encounter subjective reports of experiences that seem to violate known limits of perception or information processing, such as highly accurate precognitive dreams, profound shared subjective experiences, or sudden, inexplicable behavioral changes. The psychological task is to determine whether these experiences are rooted in known, albeit complex, neurobiological processes (e.g., unusual firing patterns, chemical imbalances, complex pattern recognition), or if they hint at genuinely **preternatural** psychological mechanisms that extend beyond current understanding of the brain's capabilities.

Parapsychology, specifically, focuses on phenomena often labeled preternatural, including extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK). Researchers in this field hypothesize that if these phenomena are real, they must operate through undiscovered natural laws relating consciousness, information, and physical reality. The debate centers on whether repeatable, controlled evidence for these phenomena exists, and if so, whether they represent a subtle, **preternatural** extension of natural laws or are simply the result of methodological flaws, statistical anomalies, or confirmation bias. Traditional psychology tends to view such claims skeptically, often providing explanations rooted in cognitive errors, subjective misinterpretation, or neurological pathology.

Furthermore, the psychological impact of encountering a perceived preternatural event is significant. When an individual experiences something that fundamentally contradicts their established worldview--a violation of the expected regularity of nature--it can induce powerful cognitive dissonance, existential anxiety, or states of profound awe. Analyzing the psychological mechanisms behind the belief in and interpretation of preternatural events is a crucial area of study, helping to differentiate between genuine, objective anomalies and culturally influenced subjective interpretations of ambiguous or unusual natural occurrences.

## Criteria for Classification and Investigation

To move a phenomenon from the realm of anecdotal curiosity toward the classification of **preternatural**, stringent criteria must be met, focusing on empirical repeatability and the demonstrable inability of all current scientific models to account for the observation. The investigation of a potentially preternatural event demands a methodology that is both highly skeptical and radically open to new theoretical possibilities. It requires scientists to not only prove that the phenomenon exists but also that it cannot be explained by any known combination of factors, including observer effects, statistical noise, or complex emergent properties of conventional systems.

The methodological process for handling such anomalies involves a systematic attempt at assimilation. Every effort must be made to explain the phenomenon using existing laws. Only when

all conventional explanations fail consistently, and when the phenomenon demonstrates repeatable characteristics under controlled conditions, does it retain its status as genuinely **preternatural**. This rigorous filtering process ensures that the category is reserved for truly anomalous observations, preventing the stagnation of scientific inquiry that occurs when "mystery" is accepted too readily as an explanation.

When investigating events that appear to defy natural law, the following steps are generally required:

**Exhaustive Conventional Analysis:** All known physical, biological, or psychological factors must be ruled out as primary or contributory causes.

**Repeatability and Control:** The phenomenon must be observable and measurable consistently under laboratory or tightly controlled field conditions, demonstrating reliable parameters.

**Theoretical Incompatibility:** Clear, mathematical demonstration that the phenomenon directly violates established laws (e.g., conservation of energy, speed of light limit) without any known compensatory mechanism.

**Hypothesis Generation:** Formulation of new, testable hypotheses based on radical extensions of existing physical theories, suggesting undiscovered forces or dimensions.

## The Epistemological Challenge

The existence of the preternatural poses a profound epistemological challenge: how can human observers, constrained by the very laws they seek to extend, effectively study phenomena that operate outside those laws? The established framework of scientific investigation relies on the predictability and uniformity of nature. When dealing with the preternatural, the very tools and assumptions used for measurement and hypothesis generation may be fundamentally inadequate or misleading. This demands a reflexive and critical approach to methodology, often requiring the invention of new instruments or entirely novel conceptual frameworks that transcend current disciplinary boundaries.

Another significant epistemological hurdle is the problem of falsifiability. Claims regarding **preternatural** phenomena are often criticized for being inherently resistant to disproof. If a phenomenon only manifests under highly specific or unpredictable conditions, critics argue that the hypothesis is rendered unfalsifiable, as its failure to appear can always be attributed to the subtle interference of unknown factors. Scientific rigor demands that even radical hypotheses concerning the preternatural must be structured in a way that allows for their potential refutation through empirical testing. If a claim cannot be falsified, it remains outside the domain of empirical science.

Ultimately, the category of the preternatural serves a vital, if temporary, function in the philosophy

of knowledge. It highlights the inherent limitations and provisional nature of all scientific models. Recognizing the preternatural is an acknowledgment that current human understanding is incomplete and that vast, undiscovered realms of the universe's operational laws likely remain hidden. It acts as a conceptual driver, motivating researchers to push the boundaries of instrumentation and theory, ensuring that science remains a dynamic, evolving discipline rather than a static dogma.

## The Evolving Boundary of Nature

The history of science can be viewed as the continuous process of assimilating the preternatural into the natural. What was once mysterious--the nature of electricity, the existence of microbes, the mechanism of continental drift--has been systematically integrated into comprehensive theoretical frameworks, demonstrating that the apparent anomalies were merely reflections of the limits of observation and theory at the time. The **preternatural** is thus not a permanent metaphysical state but a temporary classification reflecting the current state of human knowledge.

Maintaining the strict conceptual boundary between the preternatural (unknown but natural) and the supernatural (metaphysically impossible) is paramount. This discipline ensures that empirical investigation remains focused on discoverable causes and testable hypotheses, preventing the retreat into non-explanation. When faced with an anomaly, the scientific imperative is always to assume a deeper, yet-to-be-discovered natural law is at play, rather than resorting to non-physical agencies.

As technology advances and theoretical physics continues to explore exotic concepts such as multiple dimensions, dark matter, and quantum gravity, the definition of the "natural" will continue to expand. Phenomena that seem utterly impossible today may, in a few decades, become foundational elements of a new scientific paradigm. The concept of the preternatural confirms that the universe is likely far richer and more complex than any current human theoretical framework can fully describe, and the relentless pursuit of these anomalies is the core mission of scientific exploration.