

Paranormal, Preternatural, Supernatural

A Definition of Terms

by Joe Wetterling

Before we can explore a subject, it is important to define the terms we will use. When exploring the unknown, it is absolutely critical. Without a common understanding of core words, it's impossible to move a discussion beyond them. I have considered several references, from psychology, theology, and occult studies, to establish my working definitions of three terms: paranormal, supernatural, and preternatural.

Paranormal

As a psychological term, it involves "the transfer of information or energy that cannot be explained by existing scientific knowledge" (Vandenbos 2006). The term "supernormal" is offered to cover the more broad category of things "exceeding or beyond the normal" (ibid). In my experience, popular use of the word "paranormal" matches well with this second definition. The former seems specifically suggestive of extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK) - or, collectively, psi phenomena. The APA (American Psychological Association) definition of "parapsychology", however, expands on their definition of paranormal and brings it more in line with current, popular usage. The study of the paranormal includes extrasensory perception, "alleged poltergeist phenomena, and the claims of mediums" (ibid). "Paranormal" seems to be used as an umbrella term, covering not only psi but other unexplained occurrences as well.

The Catholic Encyclopedia (Broderick 1976) offers a comparable description of parapsychology. While the word "paranormal" does not appear - instead "psychical research" is described - it is useful to note a parallel in how parapsychology is described. It is the investigation of "extrasensory perception (ESP), psychokinesis (PK), thought transmission, and psychic phenomena...

A strict etymological definition is "beside normal", which I find fitting. The formal definitions from psychology and theology both allow for a broad scope, and popular use nearly requires it. Many people use "paranormal" in slightly different ways - to refer solely to ghosts, to refer to psychic activity, or to refer to anything non-normal such as aliens, strange creatures, and human psychic abilities. Paranormal can safely remain an "umbrella term" over a myriad of things most people wouldn't consider part of everyday life.

It is worth noting that this broad definition is necessarily dynamic - it is going to change as our understanding of the world changes. What is non-normal today may become normal tomorrow. If we discover precisely what a ghost is, ghosts will cease to be paranormal (and, perhaps, many paranormal investigators will need to change their titles). As long as we can accept this, the broad definition is perfectly serviceable.

Supernatural

The APA doesn't seem to differentiate the terms "supernatural" and "preternatural". Preternatural phenomena "appear to be inexplicable in terms of the known laws of the physical universe"; supernatural phenomena "appear to depart from or transcend the laws of the physical universe". Helpfully, a qualifier is added to the second definition: "...especially when... taken to be the work of gods, demons, or spirits."

The "Concise Dictionary of Theology" gives credit for the word "supernatural" to Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite and connects the word closely with God. Supernatural events raise us "...above what is due to our human nature". In Fr. John Hardon's Modern Catholic Dictionary, there is no entry for "supernatural" as a solitary word. However, in many instances, when it modifies a word (i.e. "end", "order", and "revelation") the definition that follows includes mention of power beyond human ability.

The secular APA dictionary names "gods" as an alleged agent in supernatural events; there is at least a partial fit between this and Christian references. While, at times, I have heard the word "supernatural" used as a synonym for "paranormal", it originated as a way to refer to the intervention of God, specifically. This original definition should stand, and I will use "supernatural" to refer to God - or whatever term you apply to a supreme being. It is interesting to note, then, that a paranormal investigator that does not believe in God would not use the term "supernatural". Another term - preternatural - should be acceptable to them, instead.

Preternatural

Hardon describes the "preternatural" as "that which is beyond the natural but is not strictly supernatural". A preternatural event is not beyond theoretically human ability, only beyond the normal ability of the person in question. Speaking Latin is certainly within human ability; speaking Latin spontaneously with no prior knowledge would be preternatural.

In the case of a non-human cause, "preternatural" includes those effects caused by entities other than God - angels and demons (or, collectively, spirits if you prefer). Moving an arm chair is certainly within human ability as well; moving an arm chair without touching it would be preternatural - whether attributed to human psychic ability or spirit intervention.

Preternatural, then, is positioned between two extremes - normal human ability (and the known laws of the natural world), and the power of God. Anything beyond the former but beneath the latter is preternatural.

Conclusion

I have limited the use of "supernatural", relative to how I've often heard it used. This narrowing of the term provides a clearer distinction between "supernatural" and "preternatural" - terms which should not be used interchangeably. In contrast to this

narrowing, I have left "paranormal" as a very broad term. Again, I believe this reflects popular use of the term, allowing people to be "paranormal investigators" or form "paranormal research groups" without feeling unnecessarily limited. This is similar to the term "physician", which applies to a broad group of people. One physician may care for only children, another for only senior citizens. One may specialize in heart disease and another in the digestive system. Paranormal investigators are free to limit themselves to "ghosts" - remembering, of course, that the two terms are not equivalent - and free to consider other phenomena "outside of the normal", such as UFOs and cryptozoology.

We might describe an unexplained event using one of these terms. We might say something is preternatural because we suspect the cause is beyond normal human abilities but is not supernatural (caused by God). Without the word "suspect", this sentence creates a paradox. If we can pinpoint the cause - God, angel, demon, human being, etc. - then something is no longer unexplained; if we cannot pinpoint it, we cannot distinguish with certainty between supernatural and preternatural. It is necessary, then, to accept some amount of "fuzziness" in our application of these terms; it is simply not possible to apply one but not the other with certainty.

That should not prevent us from trying and from making the best attempt at clarity in our use of the terms. The definitions I have presented here will be my working definitions for future articles, and I hope other people involved in paranormal research will find them useful as well.

Citations

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