

Natural explanations

Humanists believe the world is a **natural** place. They don't believe in anything supernatural. They don't believe in supernatural beings (such as ghosts or witches) or supernatural powers (such as mind reading or seeing into the future). Nor do they believe in a god. They don't think there is any good or persuasive evidence to believe. They also don't believe that religion or the supernatural is necessary to explain how the world works. They believe we should always look for **natural explanations** for events.

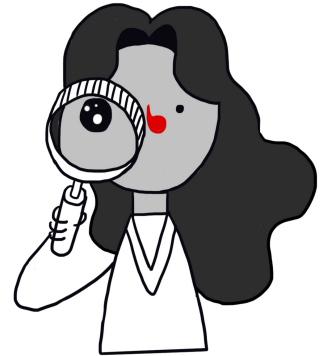
Activity

Look at the events below.

- a) Could they have a natural explanation?
- b) If so, what could that natural explanation be?

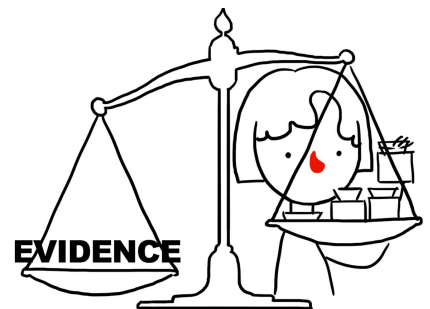
Events:

- 1) There is a strange sound in the night.
- 2) You bump into an old friend on holiday.
- 3) You see a ghostly figure in a photograph.
- 4) Someone you have never met before is able to guess what you are thinking about.
- 5) You read the astrology forecast for your star sign and it comes true.
- 6) Someone walks over hot coals in bare feet.
- 7) Someone says a prayer for somebody who is ill and they get better.
- 8) A statue of the Virgin Mary weeps.
- 9) A mysterious object is seen in the night sky.



We can't always find a natural explanation straight away.

Humanists believe we should have **rational patience**. There are many things we were unable to explain in the past but for which we now have a natural explanation (the weather, disease, the reason animals are suited to their environment). This does not *prove* that there are no supernatural forces, but humanists believe it gives us good reason to doubt them and to keep looking for natural explanations for events.



The philosopher **David Hume** was sceptical when it came to extraordinary claims. He believed we should always ask whether it is more likely that the normally secure laws of nature broke down for a moment or that something else happened. Perhaps, for example, we were mistaken about what we saw or heard (we can be more susceptible to error when it is something we want to believe). Or perhaps someone is tricking us or lying to us. Hume would say that both these explanations are more likely than that the laws of nature broke down, so it is rational to conclude that we are mistaken or are being deceived.

Natural explanations

Event	Possible natural explanation
There is a strange sound in the night.	There is very likely a natural explanation: a water pipe, a cat outside, an aeroplane passing overhead. When it is dark and we are half-asleep we can also make mistakes, our brains can trick us into seeing and hearing things that are not there.
You bump into an old friend on holiday.	This is just an unlikely event, but unlikely things sometimes happen. We often remember the times that unlikely things happen and forget all the times that they don't.
You see a ghostly figure in a photograph.	It is possibly something caused by a trick of the light or how the photograph has been developed. Such effects are common, particularly in old photographs. It is also possible that the photograph has been deliberately edited to make it look like there is something unnatural in the image.
Someone you have never met before is able to guess something about you that they could not know.	It could be a lucky guess. Or perhaps the person has used clever questioning to get you to admit something without realising it. Magicians and mediums can do this through a technique called 'cold reading'.
You read the astrology forecast for your star sign and it comes true.	Astrologers and fortune tellers use many tricks to make people believe that they have predicted the future. Their predictions are rarely specific and we often only remember the bits that seem to fit what happened.
Someone walks over hot coals in bare feet.	This has been explained by science. The embers are not good conductors of heat, and the feet are not in contact with the ground long enough to burn. Sweat produced on the base of people's feet can also produce a protective water vapour.
Someone says a prayer for somebody who is ill and they get better.	There is likely to be a natural explanation for their recovery. There is no evidence the prayer made a difference. People get better all the time, even when doctors say they won't (doctors can make mistakes). People who believe in the power of prayer still often take medicine.
A statue of the Virgin Mary weeps.	Many examples of such an event have been revealed to be hoaxes (deliberate tricks). There are also possible scientific explanations: water builds up in the porous clay of the statue and oozes out of tiny flaws in the glaze.
A mysterious object is seen in the night sky.	It is likely to be something natural: a bird, a plane, or a trick of the light. Sometimes people have hallucinations and see things that are not really there. This can even happen to several people at the same time – a group hallucination.