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The Gravity of Weight

Our Unnatural Fascination With All Things Natural

The word "natural" has taken on mythic significance in American culture.

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KEY POINTS

- There is no FDA or USDA legally-binding definition of the word natural.
- Labeling a product as natural does not necessarily convey any health or safety benefits.
- The distinction between natural and artificial is somewhat arbitrary.



What is Man? He is a living creature, of soul and body, by English artist Elizabeth Wang, 2005. Private Collection.

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Natural has come to stand for goodness and virtue and has acquired an almost holy connotation, a “synonym for God,” writes Alan Levinovitz, a professor of religion, in his thought-provoking book *Natural: How Faith in Nature’s Goodness Leads to Harmful Fads, Unjust Laws, and Flawed Science* (2020).

Unnatural, then, has the connotation of evil, moral deficiency, or even something inhuman. An “unnatural birth” suggests deformity, and an “unnatural death” typically indicates someone *cut down* by murder or illness. “Nature worship infuses our culture” and has taken on mythic proportions, says Levinovitz.

The word *natural* has multiple origins, partly derived from Latin and partly from French. The Oxford English Dictionary definitions include *produced by nature, without human interference, innate, indigenous, not contrived, unaltered, and not artificial*.

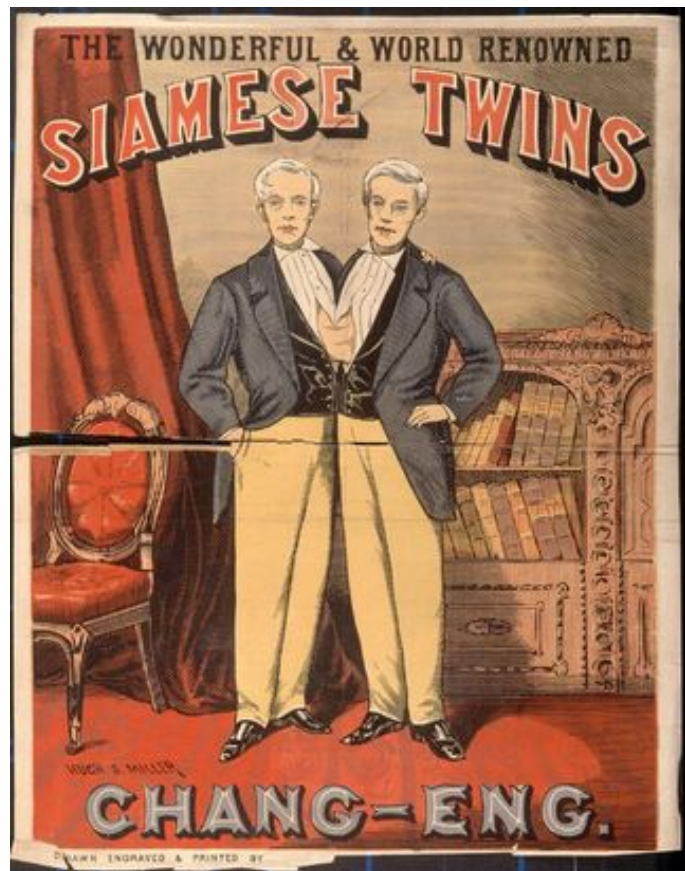
Nature itself is an abstraction, “for which many cultures have no one name.” It is both given and constructed, and perhaps “the most complex word in the language,” writes Spirn, in her poetic book, *The Language of Landscape*.

Natural pervades our language: we have Darwin’s natural selection, natural childbirth, natural causes, natural burn, natural disaster, natural immunity, natural healing, natural wit, and naturalized citizens, among others.

Words such as *nascent, innate, native,* and *nation* have the same root. The connotation of the word *natural*, though, has come to represent some past glorified Eden and has resulted in a promiscuous use of the label *natural*, particularly on food products, to signify healthiness.

The phrase *natural flavoring*, for example, says Eric Schlosser, in his book *Fast Food Nation*, is listed now among ingredients on almost everything.

Bee Wilson, in her book on food fraud, *Swindled*, describes how the flavor industry years ago had “open contempt” for foods from nature—“so messy, so expensive, and so hopelessly unreliable” compared to synthetic flavors, with their stable prices, quality control, and availability. The companies, though, wanted to “preserve the illusion” that their products were natural.



Chang and Eng, the Siamese twins, in evening dress. Color wood engraving by H.S. Miller. The birth of these twins would be considered an “unnatural” birth, i.e., indicating deformity.

Source: Wellcome Trust Collection/Public Domain



The Tree of Life, first half of 17th century. British. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC.

Source: Credit: Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain.

However, the distinction between artificial and natural can be “somewhat arbitrary and absurd”: natural and artificial flavors sometimes contain the same chemicals but are manufactured by different processes in the same chemical plants, “places that few people would associate with Mother Nature” writes Schlosser.

Michael Pollan (2009), who has cautioned us against eating breakfast cereals that change the color of the milk or, for that matter, anything our great-grandmothers would not recognize as food, refers to these as “industrial novelties.” Schlosser adds, “Calling any of

these flavors *natural* requires a flexible attitude toward the English language and a fair amount of irony.”

The point, says Levinovitz, is not that artificial foods or flavors are necessarily harmful or destructive. Still, that deceptive labeling prevents the consumer from knowing what he or she is eating. He adds, “Goodness is many things: corporate transparency, environmental health, farmers’ and animals’ welfare, affordability, healthfulness.”

Significantly, both the FDA and the USDA, governmental agencies responsible for protecting our food supply, have avoided providing a clear, legal-binding definition of *natural* on a label (Weaver, 2014; FDA website). The concept of natural food, then, is “impossibly vague and relative” (Levinovitz). “What exactly is a natural tortilla chip?” asks Weaver.

Most consumers who welcome the label have no idea that the term *natural* is currently “unregulated and undefined in the food industry” (Weaver, 2014). A food labeled *natural* creates a buying incentive, although naturalness “definitely does not imply

that a food product is healthier, less dangerous, or tastier” (Saraiva et al., 2020).

There is a “very positive attitude” toward *natural* and a “surprising degree of similarity” in how *natural* is conceptualized. *Natural*, though, was defined primarily by the absence of certain “negative” aspects, such as additives and human intervention, rather than by anything positive (Rozin et al., 2012). Another much larger survey thought natural was “crucial,” though *natural*, was defined differently (e.g., how the food was grown; how produced technologically; or properties of the final food product) across these studies (Román et al., 2017).

The label *natural* has infiltrated not just foods and flavorings but health products for the body as well. “Browsing the supplement section of Whole Foods can feel like time-traveling to a medieval apothecary,” with the word *natural* on the labels conferring “mystic blessings,” says Levinovitz: the vast array of homeopathic potions, with a belief in nature's powers, sometimes indicates an “active rejection” of basic science.

Historically, unlike today, natural healing would have included surgery and medications; its opposite would have involved exorcisms, incantations, and prayers (Levinovitz).



English artist John William Waterhouse. "The Soul of the Rose," 1908. Private Collection. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish the natural from the artificial, but clearly, here is the natural smell of a rose—its soul.

Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain



Garden of Eden by German artist Adi Holzer, 2012. The word "natural" has taken on mythic proportions and connotes Eden.

Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain. Photo credit: Bianca Schutzenhofer.

For Levinovitz, natural healing is not about selling snake oil or the equivalent. And instead, it appreciates that illness is more than physiological dysfunction. He is particularly (and rightly so) critical of those who support *consecrated consumerism* in which shopping for products dedicated to nature becomes a kind of ritual and “spiritualized retail therapy.” In other words, when we buy something labeled *natural*, we feel we are not only doing good for our bodies but also good for the planet. Pampering ourselves, then, says Levinovitz, becomes a form of *altruism*. He emphasizes that the history

of religion is "replete with warnings about the commodification of holiness."

Levinovitz cautions those who exhibit “righteous certainty.” For example, he failed to confirm his biases about the value of eating organic and found that most studies are not able to establish any apparent benefit. Uncertainty and humility can be virtues, he says. Consumer, beware, particularly when the label says *natural*.

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Adam and Eve fresco. Scandinavian School, 13th century. History Museum, Oslo, Norway. The theme of Adam and Eve in Eden is found in the art of many countries.

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