It isn’t every day that the definition of a common English word that is ubiquitous in common parlance is challenged in federal court, but that is precisely what has happened with the word “natural.” During the past few years, some 200 class-action suits have been filed against food manufacturers, charging them with misuse of the adjective in marketing such edible oxymorons as “natural” Cheetos Puffs, “all-natural” Sun Chips, “all-natural” Naked Juice, “100 percent all-natural” Tyson chicken nuggets and so forth. The plaintiffs argue that many of these products contain ingredients — high-fructose corn syrup, artificial flavors and colorings, chemical preservatives and genetically modified organisms — that the typical consumer wouldn’t think of as “natural.”

Judges hearing these cases — many of them in the Northern District of California — have sought a standard definition of the adjective that they could cite to adjudicate these claims, only to discover that no such thing exists.

Something in the human mind, or heart, seems to need a word of praise for all that humanity hasn’t contaminated, and for us that word now is “natural.” Such an
ideal can be put to all sorts of rhetorical uses. Among the antivaccination crowd, for example, it’s not uncommon to read about the superiority of something called “natural immunity,” brought about by exposure to the pathogen in question rather than to the deactivated (and therefore harmless) version of it made by humans in laboratories. “When you inject a vaccine into the body,” reads a post on an antivaxxer website, Campaign for Truth in Medicine, “you’re actually performing an unnatural act.” This, of course, is the very same term once used to decry homosexuality and, more recently, same-sex marriage, which the Family Research Council has taken to comparing unfavorably to what it calls “natural marriage.”

So what are we really talking about when we talk about natural? It depends; the adjective is impressively slippery, its use steeped in dubious assumptions that are easy to overlook. Perhaps the most incoherent of these is the notion that nature consists of everything in the world except us and all that we have done or made. In our heart of hearts, it seems, we are all creationists.

In the case of “natural immunity,” the modifier implies the absence of human intervention, allowing for a process to unfold as it would if we did nothing, as in “letting nature take its course.” In fact, most of medicine sets itself against nature’s course, which is precisely what we like about it — at least when it’s saving us from dying, an eventuality that is perhaps more natural than it is desirable.

Yet sometimes medicine’s interventions are unwelcome or go overboard, and nature’s way of doing things can serve as a useful corrective. This seems to be especially true at the beginning and end of life, where we’ve seen a backlash against humanity’s technological ingenuity that has given us both “natural childbirth” and, more recently, “natural death.”

This last phrase, which I expect will soon be on many doctors’ lips, indicates the enduring power of the adjective to improve just about anything you attach it to, from cereal bars all the way on up to dying. It seems that getting end-of-life patients and their families to endorse “do not resuscitate” orders has been challenging. To many ears, “D.N.R.” sounds a little too much like throwing Grandpa under the bus. But according to a paper in The Journal of Medical Ethics, when the orders are reworded to say “allow natural death,” patients and family members and even medical professionals are much more likely to give their
consent to what amounts to exactly the same protocols.

The word means something a little different when applied to human behavior rather than biology (let alone snack foods). When marriage or certain sexual practices are described as “natural,” the word is being strategically deployed as a synonym for “normal” or “traditional,” neither of which carries nearly as much rhetorical weight. “Normal” is by now too obviously soaked in moral bigotry; by comparison, “natural” seems to float high above human squabbling, offering a kind of secular version of what used to be called divine law. Of course, that’s exactly the role that “natural law” played for America’s founding fathers, who invoked nature rather than God as the granter of rights and the arbiter of right and wrong.

“Traditional” marriage might be a more defensible term, but traditional is a much weaker modifier than natural. Tradition changes over time and from culture to culture, and so commands a fraction of the authority of nature, which we think of as timeless and universal, beyond the reach of messy, contested history.

Implicit here is the idea that nature is a repository of abiding moral and ethical values — and that we can say with confidence exactly what those values are. Philosophers often call this the “naturalistic fallacy”: the idea that whatever is (in nature) is what ought to be (in human behavior). But if nature offers a moral standard by which we can measure ourselves, and a set of values to which we should aspire, exactly what sort of values are they? Are they the brutally competitive values of “nature, red in tooth and claw,” in which every individual is out for him- or herself? Or are they the values of cooperation on display in a beehive or ant colony, where the interests of the community trump those of the individual? Opponents of same-sex marriage can find examples of monogamy in the animal kingdom, and yet to do so they need to look past equally compelling examples of animal polygamy as well as increasing evidence of apparent animal homosexuality. And let’s not overlook the dismaying rates of what looks very much like rape in the animal kingdom, or infanticide, or the apparent sadism of your average house cat.

The American Puritans called nature “God’s Second Book,” and they read it for moral guidance, just as we do today. Yet in the same way we can rummage around in the Bible and find textual support for pretty much whatever we want to do or
argue, we can ransack nature to justify just about anything. Like the maddening
whiteness of Ahab’s whale, nature is an obligingly blank screen on which we can
project what we want to see.

So does this mean that, when it comes to saying what’s natural, anything goes?
I don’t think so. In fact, I think there’s some philosophical wisdom we can harvest
from, of all places, the Food and Drug Administration. When the federal judges
couldn’t find a definition of “natural” to apply to the class-action suits before them,
three of them wrote to the F.D.A., ordering the agency to define the word. But the
F.D.A. had considered the question several times before, and refused to attempt a
definition. The only advice the F.D.A. was willing to offer the jurists is that a food
labeled “natural” should have “nothing artificial or synthetic” in it “that would not
normally be expected in the food.” The F.D.A. states on its website that “it is
difficult to define a food product as ‘natural’ because the food has probably been
processed and is no longer the product of the earth,” suggesting that the industry
might not want to press the point too hard, lest it discover that nothing it sells is
natural.

The F.D.A.’s philosopher-bureaucrats are probably right: At least at the
margins, it’s impossible to fix a definition of “natural.” Yet somewhere between
those margins there lies a broad expanse of common sense. “Natural” has a fairly
sturdy antonym — artificial, or synthetic — and, at least on a scale of relative
values, it’s not hard to say which of two things is “more natural” than the other:
cane sugar or high-fructose corn syrup? Chicken or chicken nuggets? G.M.O.s or
heirloom seeds? The most natural foods in the supermarket seldom bother with the
word; any food product that feels compelled to tell you it’s natural in all likelihood
is not.

But it is probably unwise to venture beyond the shores of common sense, for it
isn’t long before you encounter either Scylla or Charybdis. At one extreme end of
the spectrum of possible meanings, there’s nothing but nature. Our species is a
result of the same process — natural selection — that created every other species,
meaning that we and whatever we do are natural, too. So go ahead and call your
nuggets natural: It’s like saying they’re made with matter, or molecules, which is to
say, it’s like saying nothing at all.
And yet at the opposite end of the spectrum of meaning, where humanity in some sense stands outside nature — as most of us still unthinkingly believe — what is left of the natural that we haven’t altered in some way? We’re mixed up with all of it now, from the chemical composition of the atmosphere to the genome of every plant or animal in the supermarket to the human body itself, which has long since evolved in response to cultural practices we invented, like agriculture and cooking. Nature, if you believe in human exceptionalism, is over. We probably ought to search elsewhere for our values.

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