

How the ‘seductive myth of nature’s goodness’ infiltrated our thinking about food, medicine and even makeup

“Humankind is poised to make monumental decisions,” Alan Levinovitz warns, “about the meaning and importance of natural goodness.”

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His book [[Natural: How Faith in Nature’s Goodness Leads to Harmful Fads, Unjust Laws, and Flawed Science](#)] feels like a series of essays thoughtful, engaging forays into realms where the idea of the natural is most abused. It is remarkably wide-ranging. Levinovitz considers childbirth, hunter-gatherer societies, bears and wolves in Yellowstone Park, alternative medicine, “wellness” brands such as Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop, nature-based metaphors for economic systems, and doping and sex segregation in elite sport.

What knits all this together is his insight that our faith in the power of nature is exactly that: a faith. Where belief in God once dominated, we now lazily substitute the word “nature”.

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A chapter on natural vanilla is a bravura exposé of our laziest thinking. We eagerly seek out “natural” vanilla flavorings over the artificial stuff And yet natural vanilla is absurdly artificial. To pollinate the flowers farmers must split them with a stick, lift a membrane and prod stigma and anther together by hand. The resulting bean then needs to be scalded, sweated, dried and “conditioned”, an intensive process that takes months.

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