

(un)natural

A poetry competition exploring ideas about naturalness

Background reading

When people describe something as natural, they might mean it is right, good, acceptable or healthy. When something is described as unnatural, people can mean it is wrong, bad, unacceptable or dangerous. Unnatural is also used to describe something that is believed to be artificial or synthetic, or has undergone human intervention.

These ideas come up a lot when people are talking about science, technology and medicine. It is sometimes said, for example, that genetically modifying or cloning plants and animals is unnatural and therefore wrong or bad. Describing food, cosmetics or medicines as natural is often a means of recommending or endorsing those things.

Some people, particularly those with a scientific background, are sceptical of the notion that what is natural must be good, and what is unnatural must be bad. Vaccinations, antibiotics and IVF could be thought of as unnatural for example, but are generally thought to be good things.

But different people mean different things when they say something is natural or unnatural – it does not just denote human intervention in nature. For example, some people report feeling disgusted by the idea of consuming genetically modified plants or animals, and may be repulsed by something that appears to subvert the 'natural order' or 'go against nature'. Others may be concerned that the creation of genetically modified food fails to respect the fine balance of natural systems in ways that may harm people, animals and the natural environment. Believing that 'nature knows best' suggests that nature has wisdom of its own that should be respected. Some people with religious beliefs believe that intervening in the natural world in certain ways would offend or contravene the will of God.

As consumers and voters, everyone has a say in how developments in science and technology are regulated, applied and made available for the benefit of society. Unpacking what different people mean when they describe something as natural or unnatural, or using similar language, could help us to have more constructive conversations about which developments are ethically acceptable and which are not. We are calling on poets from across the UK to help us to explore ideas about naturalness in a creative way.

Find out more about the Nuffield Council on Bioethics project on naturalness, our poetry competition and our commissioned poet, Kayo Chingonyi at:
www.nuffieldbioethics.org/naturalness