



Cult of Misinformation

“Organic” as a God Term for Ethical and Nutritional Superiority

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Drawing together numerous examples of “natural food” rhetoric, Genevieve Gordon analyzes the rhetorical power of the term “organic” and its offshoots to inspire cultish enthusiasm within the discourse of food culture. This essay was written for Rhetoric & Composition with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

IN THE WORLD OF FOOD rhetoric and advertising, nothing comes closer to a “god term” than the elusive, enthymematic “organic” (see Weaver 212). As the world’s growing population relies more heavily on scientific advancements, modern society seemingly becomes more and more detached from the “real” world, and life’s basic components, like food, must be produced through partially artificial means. With this knowledge in mind, “organic” is an extremely effective label in targeting consumers who feel an ongoing dread of “processed foods” and the potential harm they cause. “Organic” and its cluster of related terms, such as “all-natural,” have loads of rhetorical assumptions behind them that strengthen their leverage in grocery shelves and political debates alike.

Although it sometimes seems the word “organic” is thrown around haphazardly, the USDA has strict guidelines on what products can use the word on their labels and advertisements. To obtain the “100% certified organic” seal, products must be grown and processed according to rigid standards that regulate “soil quality, animal raising practices, pest and weed control, and use of additives” (McEvoy). If a product or package has the label “Made with organic [ingredient or food group],” at least 70% of the food must be produced organically. Thus, even within the technical definitions of organic, there are varying degrees of organicness implied by the word in different contexts. To the average consumer, though, these definitions are mostly meaningless; the non-literal, rhetorical meanings have a weightier impact on the thoughts and feelings of consumers. This makes the label effective in what Kenneth Burke calls “persuasion of attitude,” though it also profoundly influences choices made about which products to buy (50). Customers not only purchase more expensive groceries, but buy into a distinct, complicated ideology.

The most obvious implication of benefit within “organic” food is logical appeal to better health. Appeals to improved health are always kairotic, for knowledge of human health is continually advancing and being healthier is always an attractive concept. The enthymematic assumption underlying anything marketed as organic contains the premise that organic food is inherently better for a consumer’s health than a similar product which is more heavily processed. Websites and blogs that endorse the “organic” lifestyle often use dramatic, fear-mongering language to push the idea that organic food is the healthiest. An article entitled “A Doctor’s Top 4 Reasons to Eat Organic” on the website *MindBodyGreen* uses this kind of language along with an ethical appeal to medical professionalism (Myers). It uses ambiguous words like “toxic,” “dangerous poisons,” and “sludge” to describe non-organic food, with very selective evidence and explanation. The author, Amy Myers, also includes

sweeping claims like, “Pesticides and herbicides are by their very nature toxic,” which an average audience is likely to believe without further research. However, as of 2012, a large-scale study conducted by Stanford Medicine shows little to no health difference between organic and non-organic foods. Although the health differences may be negligible, the price differences certainly are not. Perhaps this explains, Michelle Brandt points out, why consumers are still convinced of the benefits of organic foods. The inextricable link between prices and perceived quality is the questionable basis of many enthymematic appeals, particularly in advertising. Since the “organic” label often accompanies a higher price tag, consumers who have the financial capabilities will assume it’s an investment in their own health, especially if someone who brands themselves as an expert suggests they do.

Myers’s article in *MindBodyGreen* opens with the statement, “Our great-great-grandparents subsisted on a completely organic diet.” She goes on to explain that the processes and pesticides used to treat non-organic or genetically modified foods “didn’t exist back then,” and suggests that to eat organic is to “eat like your ancestors.” This blatant emotional appeal to nostalgia and golden-age thinking is popular in rhetoric about “organic” and “natural” food; it implies that to eat organic is to harken back to a simpler time, and that, today, food is simply a corrupt version of what it once was. Another example of this rhetorical strategy is an internet meme image of a woman with vegetables, made to look like a vintage advertisement, which flashes the slogan: “Try organic food . . . or as your grandparents called it, ‘food’” (Food Matters). A version of the image also appears on a website called *Eden’s Corner*, a blog dedicated to natural eating, medicine, and lifestyle. The visual component relates the ad to a vision of “perfect” 1950s America, linking organic foods to the famous prosperity of a post-World-War-II economy and middle class. Yet another enthymeme is produced—just because something was done in previous generations, is it better, healthier, or more ethical? This line of thinking is precisely what led to the development

and popularity of the Paleo diet; it assumes that what worked in previous civilizations is still the best way. In this way, “organic” becomes synonymous with “the way things are supposed to be,” or, “the way things used to be, back when things were better.”

The term “organic” encompasses all these meanings and more but is still required to have a factual basis. Its cousin term, “natural,” however, is thrown about more recklessly, cashing in on all the enthymematic assumptions of “organic” without any of the real meaning. The USDA has no strict definition for “natural”; it is ambiguous but sounds close enough to “organic” that consumers think them to be identical. In 2011, Wendy’s introduced an ad campaign for their new “Natural-Cut Fries,” which include some potato skin and are dashed with sea salt instead of processed salt. A description of the product on their website includes the misleading phrase, “for a taste as real as it gets” (“Natural-Cut Fries”). Wendy’s doesn’t have to explain why this new method of fry-cutting is somehow healthier than the previous way; the “natural” enthymeme does it for them. As Aristotle says in the *Rhetoric*, “what is natural is pleasant”; just as with “organic,” customers think “natural” fries will be better for them (67). This advertisement is representative of another effect of the “natural” god-term; it implies the alternative must be “unnatural.” What does it mean for French fries to be cut unnaturally, and what is the difference in terms of health? As it turns out, Wendy’s new fries contain more calories *and* more sodium than they used to, but their sales have still increased.

The political culmination of the rhetorical uses of “organic” and “natural” is the argument over infamous GMOs—genetically modified organisms—used in the production of food. GMO foods are the antithesis of what its opponents would describe as organic or natural, and the rhetoric in anti-GMO blogs and propaganda reflects this. An advertisement designed for the Center for Food Safety shows a shockingly bizarre image of a chicken with horse legs, fish fins, and a lizard head, with the text: “Genetically engineered food is

just unnatural” (Schorling). The image is strange and uncomfortable, which is precisely how anti-GMO advocates want GMOs to be seen by their audiences. It’s a visual emotional appeal to disgust, and enthymematically equates a mutant animal with genetically enhanced food for dramatic effect. A post on *Eden’s Corner*, entitled “GMO: The Feeding of America,” the author warns, “we are being used as human guinea pigs in a vast genetic experiment,” attempting to blend the “organic” ethos with conspiracy to paint a gruesome portrait of GMOs and companies like Monsanto (“GMO”). The “unnatural” argument against genetically modified food is a rhetorical work-around; it allows the rhetor to avoid more meaningful discourse about the real topic. If “natural” and “organic” are god terms in food marketing and GMO debate, “unnatural” is the “devil term” (Weaver 222); it can shut down a pro-GMO argument by the simple effect of making a GMO endorsement seem as though it goes against nature and is therefore unhealthy. “Unnatural” has been similarly used to attack issues like gay marriage and vaccinations without any scientific backing; it sounds legitimate without needing to be. If something doesn’t occur naturally, or in nature, is it something to avoid, even if the effects of it are positive?

The rhetorical connotations of “organic” and “natural” all come together to create a distinct community of “organic living” activists, especially online, that identify with a distinct set of political opinions about environmental issues, GMOs, and other matters. In the case of *Eden’s Corner*, knowledge of organic living, and the dangers of GMOs and processed food, is presented as nearly cult-like. A segment of the site called “Hidden Truths” is populated with conspiratorial rhetoric about topics that span from “poisonous” water to the dangers of childhood vaccinations. Those who identify themselves with natural-living causes often also subscribe to an ideology increasingly skeptical of corporate corruption and government conspiracy. Although an extreme example, *Eden’s Corner* brands its followers “Fringe Dwellers,” hinting at some kind of secret knowledge known by few, while the unenlightened are called “the

masses, naïve souls, unaware their thoughts and actions.” These descriptions exemplify Burkean identification and division in an extreme form (Burke 22-23); it isolates a distinct “us” and “them”: those who are enlightened, and those who are “brainwashed.”

Eden’s Corner’s divisive rhetoric even appeals to a religious desire to be “enlightened” or “saved.” If the organic advocates make a convincing argument that the “masses” are being controlled and corrupted, an uninformed audience is likely to believe this rhetor has their interests in mind, enforcing ethical credibility. The phrase “Eden’s corner” itself is a biblical reference that emotionally appeals to a wide Christian audience. In a segment called, “Masses, Do the Opposite and Succeed,” *Eden’s Corner* speaks directly to the reader, envisioning the particular audience, the person reading this page, is unique: “The masses, they scarcely read, albeit an occasional glimpse at a tabloid headline while in the grocery store. But certainly not anything that might improve their lives.” The webpage continues, “But you, you’re different,” and urges the reader to “get it right, before it’s too late.” The entire article appeals to a particularly American commonplace that touts the importance of “bucking the system,” which pervades rhetoric that presents “organic” as the alternative to “conventional.”

In addition to serving up inflammatory conspiracies and pitching a dramatic, cultish ideology, *Eden’s Corner* has a shop that sells organic food and “natural” medicine. The identification with and adherence to a set of beliefs that the website pitches to accompany organic food also functions as a marketing tool; it suggests the extra cash is worth it, since, in exchange, the customer is allowed access into an elite club that refuses to be duped by corporate greed. In some contained, simpler way, this is the same rhetoric that convinces an everyday grocery shopper to invest in food with an “organic” label, even if they’ve never found themselves in the depths of a natural-living blog site. These appeals function together to create an image of ethical superiority that has been attractive and rhetorically effective enough to produce a total of \$47 million in organic

food sales in 2016 alone. Appeals to supposed health, morality, and identity never go out of style, so despite the USDA's efforts to pinpoint a measurable definition of "organic," the rhetorical use of the word will continue to be an exaggerated marketing tool for customers who like to think themselves smarter and healthier than others. It is unlikely humans will ever cease to make uninformed, emotional decisions. ►►

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