



## I Recycle!

I spoke recently to a group of college students on the economics of environmental protection. As I spoke of the market's amazing ability to conserve natural resources, one young man asked me, "Do you recycle?"

"No," I answered.

"Well, thanks for the effort," he replied with bitter sarcasm.

Before I could explain my answer, he gathered his books angrily and marched from the room. While no one else left, I could tell that most of the remaining students shared the sentiments of the student who had left. My talk's conclusion was awkward and unsuccessful.

Only later did I realize that I'd given the wrong answer. In fact, I recycle every day of my life!

Consider a typical day.

After I awaken, I shower and dry myself with a towel that I've had for a few years. I use this towel day after day. I don't discard it after one use. When it gets dirty, I toss it in the washing machine to clean it for further use. I recycle my towel.

Then I brew coffee and fix breakfast. Each day I use the same coffeemaker that I used the day before. I clean it after each use, recycling it for the next time. My wife and I drink the coffee from mugs that have been used many times in the past. (Actually, one set of our coffee mugs was handed down to

us after my wife's parents used them for several years.) We also eat our breakfasts using dishes and utensils that are recycled from countless past uses. After breakfast, we don't throw our mugs, dishes, and utensils away; instead we put them in the dishwasher to be recycled for yet another use.

After breakfast, I dress myself in clothes that I've worn before and that I will wear again. My underwear, my pants, my shirt, my necktie, my belt, my coat, my shoes, my wristwatch—all are recycled from previous uses. And when I remove these clothes at day's end, I'll recycle them again, with the help of our automatic washer and dryer.

When my wife and I drive to work, we drive automobiles that we used the day before and that we'll drive for the next few years. We don't junk them after a single use. Instead, we recycle them, day in and day out.

The pots and pans that we use to prepare our meals—our toaster—our refrigerator—our television—our compact discs—our furniture—and, indeed, our house itself are all routinely recycled, use after use after use.

My family and I recycle a lot! And we're not alone. Everyone recycles a lot.

### Real Recycling

If I'd responded in this way to that student he probably would have asserted, "That's not recycling. Real recycling is re-using things that most of us think of as garbage."

That student, like most people, thinks of recycling as dealing with a handful of items

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that are wrongly thought to be semi-precious: cans, bottles, plastic containers, and newspapers.

But why do I treat my clothing and dinner dishes different from my empty beer cans and day-old newspapers? The student who walked out on me sees that as a moral failing. I don't.

No moral issue turns on recycling per se. It might well be immoral to waste things, but contrary to popular misconception, failure to recycle is not wasteful. Real waste happens when someone recycles for the sake of recycling—that is, recycles without weighing its costs and benefits. If it is immoral to waste, then it is immoral to recycle when the benefits of doing so are less than the costs of doing so, because such recycling is wasteful.

We recycle as much as we do because it makes good sense to do so. It would indeed be wasteful for me to discard my fine china after each use. So I don't do it. And I don't do it because the market reliably tells me that it's wasteful to do so. I'm of no mind to purchase new china after each meal because the price of fine china far exceeds the value to me of the time I must spend cleaning and storing mine for future use. I'd quickly go broke if I refused to recycle most of the things that I regularly recycle. (Incidentally, I'll bet that even Bill and Melinda Gates recycle their fine china.)

But I do discard paper plates after each use. The reason, at bottom, is no different from the reason I recycle my china rather

than discard it: it would be wasteful to do otherwise. After all, I *could* recycle paper plates. Careful washing would enable my family and me to reuse paper plates a couple or three times. But notice what would be wasted: valuable labor and time. One important reason for using paper plates would be undermined. That reason, of course, is the importance of saving the time and effort that it would take to wash dishes following the meal. Time that I could spend playing with my son, relaxing with my wife, reading a good book, or fixing a leaky faucet would be wasted cleaning paper plates. And to what purpose? None. Paper plates are so expendable precisely because the materials necessary to make them are so abundant. This abundance is reflected accurately in their low price.

The market prices resources accurately enough for us to be confident that if the materials used to make any items that are not now recycled become sufficiently scarce, the prices of those materials will rise. These higher input prices will raise the prices paid by consumers for these items, giving consumers greater incentives to recycle them.

Reflecting on the impressive amount of recycling that actually takes place daily casts doubt on the prevailing misperception that people are naturally wasteful and mindlessly irresponsible. In fact, market prices compel us to recycle when recycling is appropriate—and to not recycle when recycling is inappropriate. □

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