PAPER OR PLASTIC

March 12, 2015
Thursday, March 12, 2015
2:30 – 4 p.m.
Museum of Northern Arizona
Facilitated by: Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

AGENDA

2:30 p.m
Welcome and Introduction
Dr. Heidi Wayment, Chair of Psychological Sciences and Director of the Compassion Project

2:45 p.m.
Community Discussion
Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

1) What are the reasons for or against using plastic bags in Northern Arizona? (P3-4)
2) Are there compelling reasons to ban or tax the use of plastic bags in Northern Arizona? (P5-6)
3) In what ways does the bag debate depend on differing values? How can such differences be resolved, if at all? (P6)

3:20 p.m.
Closing Questions and Recap of Discussion

Community Committee (P7)

Special thanks to our partners, supporters and venue hosts!
1) What are the reasons for or against using plastic bags in Northern Arizona?

The question for this section asks us to think about whether it’s better—all things considered—to use plastic bags or some alternative when shopping for groceries and other items.

Here are the typical grocery bags consumers use:

- **Plastic bags**: commonly used as shopping bags. They are made of three different types of polyethylene; high-density polyethylene, low-density polyethylene, and linear low-density polyethylene.
- **Paper bags**: these bags can be recycled, and they are made from a renewable resource.
- **Cotton bags**: these bags can be made from organic cotton or recycled cotton. Cotton bags are strong and also made from a renewable resource.

It may be helpful to distinguish primarily environmental reasons from other kinds of reasons. Note also that some of the reasons may apply globally while others may be local.

**Environmental reasons against the use of plastic bags:**

One of the main arguments against the use of plastic bags is that they are an environmental hazard. Below are some reasons frequently given in support of this argument:

- They pollute the streets and forests.
- Plastic bags make up 80% of windblown litter from Flagstaff’s Cinder Lake Landfill.
- The bags break down into small petro-polymers which eventually make their way into the soil and water. Many worry that this contaminates the soil and water, threatening to harm humans and non-human animals.
- Plastic bags may be deadly when ingested by wildlife.
- If a bag comes in contact with wet waste, it is contaminated and not suitable for recycling.
- They are produced from non-renewable resources.
- Production of plastic bags may contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

**Other reasons against the use of plastic bags:**

Not all the reasons against using plastic bags are environmental. For example, plastic bags may also place a financial burden on cities. Below are some findings from Flagstaff City Council Member Eva Putzova who has written in the *AZ Daily Sun* about Flagstaff’s experience with plastic bag clean up:

- Flagstaff reported “spending nearly $70,000 annually to clean up plastic bag litter at the landfill and another $62,000 annually in productivity losses due to bags clogging the recycling equipment at the Material Recovery Facility.”
- Flagstaff additionally finds that “recycling one ton of plastic bags cost $4,000, while the recycled product can be sold on the commodities market for only $32.”
Environmental reasons for the use of plastic bags:

In contrast to the previous argument, some argue plastic bags are a net good for the environment. Byron Schlomach has recently argued in the *AZ Daily Sun* that plastic bags are versatile and environmentally friendly. Below are some of the main points from his argument:

- Plastic bags take up less space in landfills and can degrade over time.
- Plastic bags can be used more than once, are durable, and are recyclable.
- Paper bags take more energy and water to produce.
- Cotton bags also take a great deal of energy and costs to make because of the process of having to grow, process, weave, sew etc.

Bag Central Station, a program for recycling plastic bags, claims that:

- The production, shipment, and recycling of plastic bags requires much less energy, therefore, their production overall generates less greenhouse gas.

The National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA) claims that plastic bags account for less than 1% of all visible litter and 0.4% of solid waste. As a result, one might argue that their environmental impact is visually negligible.

Other reasons in favor of using plastic bags:

There may also be non-environmental reasons in favor of using plastic bags.

- According to some, discontinuing the use of plastic bags would reduce jobs and local manufacturing companies, resulting in “funneling profits to big grocers without any money going to a public purpose or environmental initiative.”

Image from: [http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/kgarrison/its_in_the_bag_california_ban.html](http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/kgarrison/its_in_the_bag_california_ban.html)
2) Are there compelling reasons to ban or tax the use of plastic bags in Northern Arizona?

Flagstaff is currently considering a ban on plastic bags. The local government has sought input on the issue from residents, environmental experts, business leaders, and others. The questions of whether we should ban or tax the use of plastic bags is related to, but distinct from, the question of whether we should use plastic bags.

- There are many things that one might disapprove of, yet not want to ban or tax.

The question for this section is whether there are compelling reasons not simply to disapprove of using plastic bags but also for the government to take a role in preventing or discouraging their use through a ban or tax.

**BAN**

One reason offered against a ban is as follows: By banning plastic bags, we may be moving the issue elsewhere and not reflecting upon how alternatives may have their own problems as well. The National Center for Policy Analysis claims:

A bag ban would do “nothing to reduce the volume of litter or the cost of waste disposal.”

Using alternative bags (such as paper or cotton) use more energy and water to produce than plastic bags, thus more harmful to the environment.

On the other hand, Flagstaff City Council Member Eva Putzova suggests that “removing as many plastic bags as possible from circulation is the most effective and financially responsible solution to reduce plastic bag litter.”

**TAX**

A tax can be effective because it still allows a consumer to have free choice though at a small price. Below is an example of how a tax on plastic bags can effect a city:

Chris Mooney from The Washington Post writes about a study with three supermarkets. Two of the supermarkets experienced bag taxes at different times while one supermarket experienced no bag tax at all. **The study found that supermarkets that implemented a bag tax saw an increase in the percentage of shoppers who brought their own bag.** The results suggest that bag fees work for increasing the habit for people carrying their own bags.

Figure 1 (next page) displays the results. CABA1 is supermarket 1 which implemented a bag tax first. CABA2 is supermarket 2 that implemented a bag tax last. GBA is the supermarket that did not implement a bag tax. Shoppers were observed four different times to see how many used their own bag. Each bar represents the number of shoppers using their own bag at the specified time and place.

Image from: http://gizmodo.com/5958117/paper-or-plastic-try-neither
In addition to engaging in factual disagreements, parties to debates like the one about plastic bags often hold differing values. This section asks us to think about what, if any, those differences in values are and how, if at all, we can reasonably discuss the issue in light of such differences?

Here are some values that are relevant to the plastic bag debate.

**FREE CHOICE**
Many values the United States holds in its society include:
- Having access to free markets
- Being able to produce what we wish.
- Having the ability to travel and live where one chooses.
- Having access to desirable goods and services through some means.

One may not like a ban on any sort of bag because it would infringe upon their ability to choose. Even implementing a policy to put a tax on a particular kind of bag, could be limiting for the individual and markets.

Even so, one’s ability to exercise their freedom to choose can be limited if their choices prevent others from exercising this freedom or puts themselves or others in danger.

**AESTHETIC**
Many residents of Northern Arizona—in Flagstaff, Sedona, and elsewhere—prize the natural beauty of the region. But not everyone values this beauty in the same way or to the same degree.

**ETHICAL**
Here are some different ethical values one can consider when concerned about the environmental impacts of using different types of bags:
- Virtue ethics: perhaps it is a personal virtue to care for the environment, but there is no ethical obligation to do so.
- Shallow ecology: perhaps we have ethical responsibilities only to people. Still, that would provide reason to ensure the Earth can sustain human life.
- Deep ecology: all forms of life (humans, plants, and animals) are given a moral standing and have a right to exist within the natural environment. Humans have an obligation to maintain the health of the environment for all life.
HOT TOPICS CAFÉ COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are nominated and selected by community members that represent diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

“Voted on Spring, 2015 “Hot Topics.”

Flagstaff

Frankie Beeseley, Program Coordinator, Friends of Flagstaff’s Future
*Joe Boles, Professor Emeritus, NAU College of Arts and Letters
*Jean Malecki-Friedland, MD, MPH: County Director and Chief Medical Professor and Chair, Preventive Medicine and Public Health, Miami Miller School of Medicine; Co-Founder: The Compassion Project
Jacque Gencarelle, Northern Arizona Behavioral Health Association
*Barbara Hickman, Superintendent, Flagstaff Unified School District
Sherman Stephens, Flagstaff Community
Craig Van Slyke, Dean, The W.A. Franke College of Business
*Michael Vincent, Dean, NAU College of Arts and Letters

Sedona & the Verde Valley

*Karen Daines, Assistant City Manager, Sedona
Paul Friedman, Sedona Citizens for Civil Dialogue
*Kate Hawkes, Producing Artistic Director, Red Earth Theatre
Darrin Karuzas, Principal, Sedona Red Rock High School
*Sandy Moriarty, Sedona Mayor
Tom O’Halleran, Keep Sedona Beautiful; Board Member, Verde River Basin Partnership
*Judy Reddington, Arts and Letters Advisory Council, NAU; Board Member, Museum of Northern Arizona; Board Director, Sedona International Film Festival
*Steve Segner, Owner, El Portal; Chair, Lodging Council, Sedona Chamber of Commerce
Patricia Lowell, Sedona Public Library, proxy for: Virginia Volkman, Director, Sedona Public Library
Jessica Williamson, Sedona City Council

Ex officio

Andrea Houchard, NAU Philosophy in the Public Interest
Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy
Robin Weeks, Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, Yavapai College, Sedona Center
Randi Wilson, Arizona Daily Sun

NAU’s Philosophy in the Public Interest is non partisan and does not endorse any position with respect to the issues we discuss. Philosophy in the Public Interest is a neutral convener for civil discourse.

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Source:
http://pubs.acs.org/cen/whatstuff/stuff/8238plasticbags.html
http://www.renewablebag.org/paper-bag-facts
http://www.bagcentralstation.com/facts.html
http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/kgarrison/its_in_the_bag_california_ban.html
http://www.nccs.net/freedom-of-choice.html
http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/freedom-of-choice.html
http://www.scienceclarified.com/El-Ex/Environmental-Ethics.html
http://gizmodo.com/5958117/paper-or-plastic-try-neither

NEXT FLAGSTAFF HOT TOPICS CAFÉ:
The Value of Live Performance

Wednesday, April 1st
6 - 7:30 p.m.
Museum of Northern Arizona

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Notes:

General Topics

The Value of Live Performance
Wednesday, April 1st, 2015, 6 - 7:30 p.m.
Museum of Northern Arizona

Environmental Topics

Setting Personal Environmental Priorities
Thursday, April 23rd, 2015, 2:30 - 4 p.m.
Museum of Northern Arizona

General Topics

The Value of Live Performance
Friday, April 3rd, 2015, 4 - 5:30 p.m.
Yavapai College, Sedona Center

Environmental Topics

Paper or Plastic
Friday, March 13th, 2015, 2 - 3:30 p.m.
Sedona Public Library

Setting Personal Environmental Priorities
Thursday, April 16th, 2015, 2:30 - 4 p.m.
Yavapai College, Sedona Center (OLLI)

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