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Plastic Times Call for Drastic Measures:

A Proposal for the Board of Sustainability at Bridgewater College

“We love our planet. That’s why we’re greening our dining operations and food choices. Our commitment to sustainable food service and environmentally friendly dining operations shows in many ways.” So declares Bridgewater College’s policy on sustainable dining practices. It is true--the school’s dining service does commit to reducing its environmental impact through the use of recyclable coffee cups, napkins made from recycled materials, and locally-sourced food (Local & Sustainable Dining). However, there is one area where Bridgewater’s commitment to sustainability does not show in its food service--the exorbitant and frequent use of plastic bags in dining service.

It is common enough to find plastic bags in any retail or grocery store and a moment later, when one steps outside, to see plastic bags clinging to the branches of trees or tumbling down the parking lot. Even on a college campus with daily grounds management at work, it is not surprising to see the occasional stray plastic bag blowing in the wind. These moments disrupt the natural beauty of the world around us, serving as a physical reminder of our irresponsibility towards the earth’s needs. But this is not the only reason the problem of plastic must be addressed. Plastic products contribute to landfill waste, disrupt oceanic ecosystems, and poison sealife. Overall, they are harmful to the earth’s well-being, not just its physical beauty and its inhabitants. Therefore, even in our small college, we are obligated on the basis of biocentric and

ecocentric principles to take measures against plastic bag usage in order to ensure the health of the earth's environment. The most effective way to combat plastic waste on campus is to implement policies involving the collaborative efforts of multiple school departments and clubs.

Since its mass production began during the industrial boom of the 1940s, plastic has posed a threat to the earth's environment (Knoblauch). Plastic is harmful to the environment's health in both its production and its disposal. Creating plastic requires crude oil and, according to a study conducted at Indiana University, "more than 1.6 billion gallons of oil are used each year for plastic bags alone" ("Plastic Bags and Oil Consumption"). The use of crude oil uses up nonrenewable resources and harms the health of the environment because of the drilling required to access oil. Additionally, according to a Washington Post report, "In 2012, America produced 28.9 million tons of plastic waste" (Macklin). Dumped plastic waste ends up in landfills and oceans, killing sea life and disrupting ecosystems (Derraik). Additionally, plastic that is dumped in landfills and oceans is estimated to take centuries to fully decompose ("Plastic Garbage"). It is clear that we are harvesting the earth's nonrenewable resources only to pollute her environment with them. As if this was not enough, the United States recycles only about 1% of its plastic bags ("Plastic Bags and Oil Consumption"). America's problem of plastic is evidently not being properly addressed; more action can be taken to combat the mass waste of plastic.

The best way to take action to help our nation reduce its waste is to begin with what is within our power to change. On our campus, one of the unaddressed threats to the earth's health is our usage of plastic bags in dining service. Bridgewater's food and dining is provided by Parkhurst Dining Services. According to Parkhurst employees Suzie and Betty who run the Take 5 to-go food service, between 900 and 925 plastic bags are used to carry students' meals every

day, five days a week. When calculated, that is about 4,500 to 4,625 bags used a week, or 18,000 to 18,500 bags a month. Over the course of a school year, September to May, approximately 150,000 bags will be consumed--just from one student dining option on campus. According to a 2006 study conducted by UN environmental programs, it is estimated that there are 46,000 floating pieces plastic per square mile in the ocean ("Plastic Garbage"). At the rate that Bridgewater students consume plastic bags from the Take 5 service, in eight semesters, one class will have produced enough plastic waste to fill an equivalent of 13.2 square miles of ocean. With this excessive amount of plastic going to landfills, it is clear that any action to combat our wasteful practices will reap beneficial results.

It must be understood first, however, that the reason plastic bag waste must be combated goes beyond simply preserving the earth's beauty or saving the lives of animals that elicit one's sympathy. By examining the ethical theories of biocentrism and ecocentrism, one can see that we must act out of respect for the earth and its inhabitants' moral worth.

According to Paul Taylor's ethical philosophy of biocentrism, all organisms--animals, plants, and microorganisms--are "teleological centers of life," meaning they have moral worth because they serve a purpose and strive for their own good in a particular way (Taylor 343). When it is accepted that all organisms deserve some form of moral consideration, Taylor argues, then one must abide by four basic rules of conduct. For the purposes of this paper, the one that must be examined is the Rule of Restitutive Justice. This states that the moral agent (humans) must take on the responsibility to restore the balance of justice between themselves and the moral subject (any other organism) when the moral agent has caused the subject harm (347). By

this rule, the members of Bridgewater College have a duty to undo whatever harm is caused to living organisms from our excessive waste.

Dissenters may argue that this theory is an invalid reason to change our policy towards plastic waste as they believe that because humans have dominance over other living organisms, they have the right to treat said organisms as they see fit. To the extent that this helps human beings' survival, this counterargument is reasonable. However, the refusal to use plastic bags is not a matter of survival, but rather a matter of convenience. And if, for our brief convenience, we are sacrificing the well-being of other living organisms, we are causing the subjects a grievance that can be avoided. That is what Taylor intends with his Rule of Restitutive Justice--to address wrongs that can be stopped or reversed. It is also important to note that a sacrifice of convenience is worthwhile in that it is less so a sacrifice on our part than a moral imperative--an act of justice to restore what we ourselves have debased.

But, cries the dissenter, biocentrism does not address the fact that landfills are often sealed off from light and weather and, therefore, do not have a direct impact on living creatures. To address this objection, one must also understand ecocentrism. Ecocentrism is the belief that the natural world has intrinsic value (Leopold 371). Environmentalist Aldo Leopold put it this way: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (371). From the ecocentric perspective, it does not matter whether something is alive--if it exists naturally in the earth, it serves a purpose and deserves to be respected. J. Baird Callicott points out that the earth is a subject of *autopoiesis* (Greek for "self-making"), thus making land an entity of its own (Callicott 389). Additionally, Leopold describes land as a "fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and

animals” (Leopold 379). By this qualification, our sending plastic waste into landfills is a violation of the integrity and health of an entity whose well-being ought to be respected.

On the whole, it is our moral responsibility to make efforts to address the amount of plastic waste Bridgewater College releases into the environment. Whether our waste ends up in landfills where it will not break down for centuries and contribute to disrupting the land’s health, or in the ocean where it will disrupt the health of its ecosystems and threaten the lives of sea creatures, our waste will only bring harm to the planet. Taking action to reduce our waste, therefore, is worth the sacrifice of our convenience and the effort it may take to implement. In the end, the planet and its nonhuman inhabitants deserve our moral consideration.

There are other, more practical objections one may have for changing Bridgewater’s use of plastic bags, including the expense of finding an alternative packaging source, the difficulty of implementing a new policy, and the concern that such efforts will not really make a great impact as a whole. The following proposal is my solution to best address these objections.

We are aware that the use of plastic bags on Bridgewater College’s campus is excessive. We know that the effect of producing large amounts of plastic waste is at best not helping the health of the planet. My proposed solution to reduce our school’s use of plastic bags on campus is based on a policy of collaboration.

First, it must be acknowledged by the administration that taking action against plastic bag waste is valid and important on our campus. With the acknowledgement of the Student Senate and the Department of Student Life, negotiations can be arranged with Parkhurst Dining Services. Then concerned students and faculty alike can lead efforts to eradicate plastic bag waste on campus.

In the new arrangement, Parkhurst will agree to no longer provide plastic bags for the Take 5 to-go line. Signs will be placed at the service to explain to students that they will not be provided plastic bags. To take the place of plastic bags, reusable bags will be provided to the incoming freshmen instead of the cups that Eagle Productions typically provides. Additionally, reusable bags will be available for purchase at affordable rates at the campus store. This will guarantee that the bags will not cost a substantial additional cost.

To ensure that students will be aware of where the campus stands and that they actually use the reusable bags, the Department of Student Life will incorporate a segment on contributing to the campus's environmental integrity into the freshmen Welcome Week mandatory sessions. In addition to plastic bag waste, this session may cover recycling and preventing littering.

To help raise awareness for the current students, student officers across majors and clubs can collaborate to motivate students to prevent plastic waste. Distributed posters with statistics on plastic waste, designated booths during the Homecoming fair, and special events highlighting specific environmental issues once per semester are some suggestions for incorporating environmental awareness on campus. Through students and faculty collaboration across departments and clubs, the campus can take steps to reduce its plastic bag waste. In time, perhaps more on-campus unsustainable practices can be exposed and addressed.

In conclusion, although Bridgewater College makes claims that it is seeking to be sustainable in its dining services, there is a glaring exception with our plastic bag waste. According to the ethical reasoning of biocentrism, any organism has value and therefore must be respected. Paul Taylor's Rule of Restitutive Justice makes us morally responsible for reversing the harm that humans cause other organisms. Additionally, ecocentrism claims that the land itself

is its own sort of “entity” based on its interconnection with living organisms. Both theories make it clear that we must take actions to reduce our waste impact on the environment. Ultimately, we are not just responsible to protect the earth’s beauty--we need to protect its well-being. If not for its sake, then for the sake of ourselves. The time to act is now, even if it seems drastic. In the end, the planet is worth it.

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