

Why I Am Not An Environmentalist:

The Science of Economics Versus the Religion of Ecology

Excerpt from
[The Armchair Economist: Economics & Everyday Life](#)
by [Steven E. Landsburg](#)
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At the age of four, my daughter earned her second diploma. When she was two, she graduated with the highest possible honors from the Toddler Room at her nursery school in Colorado. Two years later she graduated from the preschool of the Jewish Community Center, where she matriculated on our return to New York State.

At the graduation ceremony, titled Friends of the Earth, I was lectured by four- and five-year-olds on the importance of safe energy sources, mass transportation, and recycling. The recurring mantra was "With privilege comes responsibility" as in "With the privilege of living on this planet comes the responsibility to care for it." Of course, Thomas Jefferson thought that life on this planet was more an inalienable right than a privilege, but then he had never been to preschool.

I'd heard some of this from my daughter before and had gotten used to the idea that she needed a little deprogramming from time to time. But as I listened to the rote repetition of a political agenda from children not old enough to read, I decided it was time for a word with the teacher. She wanted to know which specific points in the catechism I found objectionable. I declined to answer. As environmentalism becomes increasingly like an intrusive state religion, we dissenters become increasingly prickly about suggestions that we suffer from some kind of aberration.

The naive environmentalism of my daughter's preschool is a force-fed potpourri of myth, superstition, and ritual that has much in common with the least reputable varieties of religious Fundamentalism. The antidote to bad religion is good science. The antidote to astrology is the scientific method, the antidote to naive creationism is evolutionary biology, and the antidote to naive environmentalism is economics.

Economics is the science of competing preferences. Environmentalism goes beyond science when it elevates matters of *preference* to matters of *morality*. A proposal to pave a wilderness and put up a parking lot is an occasion for conflict between those who prefer wilderness and those who prefer convenient parking. In the ensuing struggle, each side attempts to impose its preferences by manipulating the political and economic systems. Because one side must win and one side must lose, the battle is hard-fought and sometimes bitter. All of this is to be expected.

But in the 25 years since the first Earth Day, a new and ugly element has emerged in the form of one side's conviction that its preferences are Right and the other side's are Wrong. The science of economics shuns such moral posturing; the religion of environmentalism embraces it.

Economics forces us to confront a fundamental symmetry. The conflict arises because each side wants to allocate the same resource in a different way. Jack wants his woodland at the

expense of Jill's parking space and Jill wants her parking space at the expense of Jack's woodland. That formulation is morally neutral and should serve as a warning against assigning exalted moral status to either Jack or Jill.

The symmetries run deeper. Environmentalists claim that wilderness should take precedence over parking because a decision to pave is "irrevocable." Of course they are right, but they overlook the fact that a decision *not* to pave is *equally* irrevocable. Unless we pave today, my opportunity to park tomorrow is lost as irretrievably as tomorrow itself will be lost. The ability to park in a more distant future might be a quite inadequate substitute for that lost opportunity.

A variation on the environmentalist theme is that we owe the wilderness option not to ourselves but to future generations. But do we have any reason to think that future generations will prefer inheriting the wilderness to inheriting the profits from the parking lot? That is one of the first questions that would be raised in any honest scientific inquiry.*

Another variation is that the parking lot's developer is motivated by profits, not preferences. To this there are two replies. First, the developer's profits are generated by his customers' preferences; the ultimate conflict is not with the developer but with those who prefer to park. Second, the implication of the argument is that a preference for a profit is somehow morally inferior to a preference for a wilderness, which is just the sort of posturing that the argument was designed to avoid.

It seems to me that the "irrevocability" argument, the "future generations" argument, and the "preferences not profits" argument all rely on false distinctions that wither before honest scrutiny. Why, then, do some environmentalists repeat these arguments? Perhaps honest scrutiny is simply not a part of their agenda. In many cases, they *begin* with the postulate that they hold the moral high ground, and conclude that they are thereby licensed to disseminate intellectually dishonest propaganda as long as it serves the higher purpose of winning converts to the cause.

The hallmark of science is a commitment to follow arguments to their logical conclusions; the hallmark of certain kinds of religion is a slick appeal to logic followed by a hasty retreat if it points in an unexpected direction. Environmentalists can quote reams of statistics on the importance of trees and then jump to the conclusion that recycling paper is a good idea. But the opposite conclusion makes equal sense. I am sure that if we found a way to recycle beef, the population of cattle would go down, not up. If you want ranchers to keep a lot of cattle, you should eat a lot of beef. Recycling paper eliminates the incentive for paper companies to plant more trees and can cause forests to shrink. If you want large forests, your best strategy might be to use paper as wastefully as possible — or lobby for subsidies to the logging industry. Mention this to an environmentalist. My own experience is that you will be met with some equivalent of the beatific smile of a door-to-door evangelist stumped by an unexpected challenge, but secure in his grasp of Divine Revelation.

This suggests that environmentalists — at least the ones I have met — have no real interest in maintaining the tree population. If they did, they would seriously inquire into the long-term effects of recycling. I suspect that they don't want to do that because their real concern is with the ritual of recycling itself, not with its consequences. The underlying need to sacrifice, and to compel others to sacrifice, is a fundamentally religious impulse.

Environmentalists call on us to ban carcinogenic pesticides. They choose to overlook the consequence that when pesticides are banned, fruits and vegetables become more expensive, people eat fewer of them, and cancer rates consequently rise.* If they really wanted to reduce cancer rates, they would weigh this effect in the balance.

Environmentalism has its apocalyptic side. Species extinctions, we are told, have consequences that are entirely unpredictable, making them too dangerous to risk. But unpredictability cuts both ways. One lesson of economics is that the less we know, the more useful it is to experiment. If we are completely ignorant about the effects of extinction, we can pick up a lot of valuable knowledge by wiping out a few species to see what happens. I doubt that scientists really *are* completely ignorant in this area; what interests me is the environmentalists' willingness to *plead* complete ignorance when it suits their purposes and to retreat when confronted with an unexpected consequences of their own position.

In October 1992 an entirely new species of monkey was discovered in the Amazon rain forest and touted in the news media as a case study in why the rain forests must be preserved. My own response was rather in the opposite direction. I lived a long time without knowing about this monkey and never missed it. Its discovery didn't enrich my life, and if it had gone extinct without ever being discovered, I doubt that I would have missed very much.

There are other species I care more about, maybe because I have fond memories of them from the zoo or from childhood storybooks. Lions, for example. I would be sorry to see lions disappear, to the point where I might be willing to pay up to about \$50 a year to preserve them. I don't think I'd pay much more than that. If lions mean less to you than they do to me, I accept our difference and will not condemn you as a sinner. If they mean more to you than to me, I hope you will extend the same courtesy.

In the current political climate, it is frequently taken as an axiom that the U.S. government should concern itself with the welfare of Americans first; it is also frequently taken as an axiom that air pollution is always and everywhere a bad thing. You might, then, have expected a general chorus of approval when the chief economist of the World Bank suggested that it might be a good thing to relocate high-pollution industries to Third World countries. To most economists, this is a self-evident opportunity to make not just Americans but *everybody* better off. People in wealthy countries can afford to sacrifice some income for the luxury of cleaner air; people in poorer countries are happy to breathe inferior air in exchange for the opportunity to improve their incomes. But when the bank economist's observation was leaked to the media, parts of the environmental community went ballistic. To them, pollution is a form of sin. They seek not to improve our welfare but to save our souls.

There is a pattern here. Suggesting an actual *solution* to an environmental problem is a poor way to impress an environmentalist, unless your solution happens to feed his sense of moral superiority. Subsidies to logging, the use of pesticides, planned extinctions, and exporting pollution to Mexico are outside the catechism; subsidies to mass transportation, the use of catalytic converters, planned fuel economy standards, and exporting industry from the Pacific Northwest are part of the infallible doctrine. Solutions seem to fall into one category or the other not according to their actual utility but according to their consistency with environmentalist dogma.

In the last weeks of the 1992 presidential campaign, George Bush, running as the candidate of less intrusive government, signed with great fanfare a bill dictating the kind of showerhead you will be permitted to buy. The American Civil Liberties Union took no position on the issue. I conjecture that if the bill had specified allowable prayerbooks instead of allowable showerheads, then even the malleable Mr. Bush might have balked — and if he hadn't, we would have heard something from the ACLU. But nothing in the science of economics suggests any fundamental difference between a preference for the Book of Common Prayer and a preference for a powerful shower spray. Quite the contrary; the economic way of thinking forces us to recognize that there *is* no fundamental difference.

The proponents of showerhead legislation argued that a law against extravagant showers is more like a law against littering than like a law against practicing a minority religion — it is designed to prevent selfish individuals from imposing real costs on others. If that was the argument that motivated Mr. Bush, then — not for the first time in his life — he had fallen prey to bad economics.

There are good economic reasons to outlaw littering and other impositions (though even this can be overdone — walking into a crowded supermarket is an imposition on all the other shoppers, but few of us believe it should be outlawed). But in most parts of the United States, water use is *not* an imposition for the simple reason that you *pay* for water. It is true that your luxuriant shower hurts other buyers by driving up the price of water but equally true that your shower helps *sellers* by exactly the same amount that it hurts buyers. You would want to limit water usage only if you cared more about buyers than sellers — in which case there are equally good arguments for limiting the consumption of *everything* — including energy-efficient showerheads.

Like other coercive ideologies, environmentalism targets children specifically. After my daughter progressed from preschool to kindergarten, her teachers taught her to conserve resources by rinsing out her paper cup instead of discarding it. I explained to her that time is also a valuable resource, and it might be worth sacrificing some cups to save some time. Her teachers taught her that mass transportation is good because it saves energy. I explained to her that it might be worth sacrificing some energy in exchange for the comfort of a private car. Her teachers taught her to recycle paper so that wilderness is not converted to landfill space. I explained to her that it might be worth sacrificing some wilderness in exchange for the luxury of not having to sort your trash. In each case, her five-year-old mind had no difficulty grasping the point. I fear that after a few more years of indoctrination, she will be as uncomprehending as her teachers.

In their assault on the minds of children, the most reprehensible tactic of environmental extremists is to recast every challenge to their orthodoxy as a battle between Good and Evil. The Saturday morning cartoon shows depict wicked polluters who pollute for the sake of polluting, not because polluting is a necessary byproduct of some useful activity. That perpetuates a damnable lie. American political tradition does not look kindly on those who advance their agendas by smearing the character of their opponents. That tradition should be upheld with singular urgency when the intended audience consists of children. At long last, have the environmentalists no decency?

Economics in the narrowest sense is a science free of values. But economics is also a way of thinking, with an influence on its practitioners that transcends the demands of formal logic. With the diversity of human interests as its subject matter, the discipline of economics is

fertile ground for the growth of values like tolerance and pluralism.

In my experience, economists are extraordinary in their openness to alternative preferences, life-styles, and opinions. Judgmental clichés like "the work ethic" and the "virtue of thrift" are utterly foreign to the vocabulary of economics. Our job is to understand human behavior, and understanding is not far distant from respect.

Following our graduation day confrontation, I sent my daughter's teacher a letter explaining why I had declined her invitation to engage in theological debate. Some of the opinions in that letter are more personal than professional. But the letter is above all a plea for the level of tolerance that economists routinely grant and expect in return. Therefore I will indulge myself as an example of how the economic way of thinking has shaped one economist's thoughts.

Dear Rebecca:

When we lived in Colorado, Cayley was the only Jewish child in her class. There were also a few Moslems. Occasionally, and especially around Christmas time, the teachers forgot about this diversity and made remarks that were appropriate only for the Christian children. These remarks came rarely, and were easily counteracted at home with explanations that different people believe different things, so we chose not to say anything at first. We changed our minds when we overheard a teacher telling a group of children that if Santa didn't come to your house, it meant you were a very bad child; this was within earshot of an Islamic child who certainly was not going to get a visit from Santa. At that point, we decided to share our concerns with the teachers. They were genuinely apologetic and there were no more incidents. I have no doubt that the teachers were good and honest people who had no intent to indoctrinate, only a certain naïveté derived from a provincial upbringing.

Perhaps that same sort of honest naïveté is what underlies the problems we've had at the JCC this year. Just as Cayley's teachers in Colorado were honestly oblivious to the fact that there is diversity in religion, it may be that her teachers at the JCC have been honestly oblivious that there is diversity in politics.

Let me then make that diversity clear. We are not environmentalists. We ardently oppose environmentalists. We consider environmentalism a form of mass hysteria akin to Islamic fundamentalism or the War on Drugs. We do not recycle. We teach our daughter not to recycle. We teach her that people who try to convince her to recycle, or who try to force her to recycle, are intruding on her rights.

The preceding paragraph is intended to serve the same purpose as announcing to Cayley's Colorado teachers that we are not Christians. Some of them had never been aware of knowing anybody who was not a Christian, but they adjusted pretty quickly.

Once the Colorado teachers understood that we and a few other families did not subscribe to the beliefs that they were propagating, they instantly apologized and stopped. Nobody asked me what exactly it was about Christianity that I disagreed with; they simply recognized that they were unlikely to change our views on the subject, and certainly had no business inculcating our child with opposite views.

I contrast this with your reaction when I confronted you at the preschool graduation. You wanted to know my specific disagreements with what you had taught my child to say. I reject your right to ask that question. The entire program of environmentalism is as foreign to us as the doctrine of Christianity. I was not about to engage in detailed theological debate with Cayley's Colorado teachers and they would not have had the audacity to ask me to. I simply asked them to lay off the subject completely, they recognized the legitimacy of the request, and the subject was closed.

I view the current situation as far more serious than what we encountered in Colorado for several reasons. First, in Colorado we were dealing with a few isolated remarks here and there, whereas at the JCC we have been dealing with a systematic attempt to inculcate a doctrine and to quite literally put words in children's mouths. Second, I do not sense on your part any acknowledgment that there may be people in the world who do not share your views. Third, I am frankly a lot more worried about my daughter's becoming an environmentalist than about her becoming a Christian. Fourth, we face no current threat of having Christianity imposed on us by petty tyrants; the same can not be said of environmentalism. My county government never tried to send me a New Testament, but it did send me a recycling bin.

Although I have vowed not to get into a discussion on the issues, let me respond to the one question you seemed to think was very important in our discussion: Do I agree that with privilege comes responsibility? The answer is no. I believe that responsibilities arise when one undertakes them voluntarily. I also believe that in the absence of explicit contracts, people who lecture other people on their "responsibilities" are almost always up to no good. I tell my daughter to be wary of such people — even when they are preschool teachers who have otherwise earned a lot of love.

Sincerely,

Steven Landsburg

* My friend Alan Stockman has made a related point. There seems to be general agreement that it is better to transfer income from the relatively rich to the relatively poor than vice versa. It seems odd then to ask present-day Americans to make sacrifices for the benefit of future generations who will almost surely be richer than we are.

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* I owe this observation to the prominent biologist Bruce Ames.

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