

Micropayments

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I think the real measure of a country's opulence should be in how much free stuff you can get.

In London, there's many a place that will charge you for packets of ketchup. Oh, it's just five p, they'll tell you, and you'll nod and hand over a coin that you wouldn't bend over to pick up if you'd dropped it, not wanting to look like a skinflint or anything. But it's *not* just five p: the cost of that ketchup packet transaction is the sense that things are OK and stable with the world. Suddenly, your mind is filled with doubt: is this restaurant 5p away from going out of business? If there weren't a fee, would people come in here and take thousands of ketchup packets and then squeeze them into bottles and sell the bottles on the black ketchup market? Are humans so supremely savage?

Now, I know that there are people who always take too many napkins. They get in the cafeteria line, buy the pizza in the gigantic cardboard box instead of on a plate, on the off chance that they don't finish the pizza while sitting there at the table, which they always do because the pizzas are tiny, and then they grab a giant wad of napkins, just in case, then after sitting down to eat the poor little pizza, they finally throw out about half a kilo of paper products. Just like visiting Las Vegas made me feel dumb for turning out the lights when I leave a room, lunch with people like this makes about eighty percent of my life feel futile.

I sometimes think that it'd be better if the napkin dispenser were at the table, but then I wind up having soup with these people at the dispenser-on-the-table place and they get a dab of soup on their chin after every spoonful and use a new, fresh napkin to dab off the dab of soup after every spoonful, until the bowl is entirely hidden behind a pile of fluffy napkins that are so fluffy because they're ninety percent unused.

So I don't know.

Restaurants that charge for rice are especially insidious. I feel as if the prices are a lie: if you know that every last person who orders the curry for \$6 will also get the rice for \$1.20, why not just admit that having curry is gonna cost \$7.20? Are people really fooled, and if so, how often?

In most parts of the world, courtesy dictates that the host offers any guests food or drink. The gas may have been shut off due to lapsed payments, and you may be getting all your calories from sucking on dust bunnies, but darn it, if there's tea in the house, the guests are gonna have some. I'm not entirely sure where the U.S.A. stands on the tea scale. My intuition was always that, like guys who are very confident in their masculinity will wear pink, places that are confident in their ability to make money wouldn't mind giving the little stuff away. But instead of this, we often find successful

people so interested in the bottom line that they forget that the whole purpose of all that cash is to make people comfortable.