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**Misplacing Environmental Responsibility:
A Causal, Political, and Ontological Critique of Green Consumerism
and the Case for Relational Repair**

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

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Number of characters: 115,693

Tartu 2026

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I. Introduction

Climate change, resource depletion, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem decline are among the most important crises in contemporary society. Faced with these environmental problems, people are increasingly concerned with questions of responsibility. Who should be held responsible for environmental damage? How should we respond to ecological crisis? And what should the relationship between humans and nature be?

During the past few decades, green consumerism has gradually become one of the most influential environmental management strategies. Its main feature is that consumers can promote market and production changes by purchasing environmental protection products, resisting high-polluting enterprises, reducing resource consumption, calculating their carbon footprint, or changing their lifestyles, ultimately achieving an environmentally sustainable society. It provides a seemingly direct, concrete, and practical approach to environmental action. When system reform is slow, international environmental governance is repeatedly hindered, yet individuals still seem able to do something through their daily consumption. Although green consumerism gives individuals a new kind of moral agency, it has gradually reframed the complex environmental problem as a matter of personal choice, lifestyle, and consumption preferences.

This thesis argues that the problem with green consumerism is not that individual action is meaningless, but that it has led to a systematic misplacement of responsibility for environmental problems. This misplacement appears on at least three levels.

First, at the causal level, green consumerism tends to overestimate the impact of individual consumption behavior on overall environmental outcomes. A single action of individual consumers does not cause climate change and ecological crises. Still, they are the result of long-term industrial production, energy mix, capital accumulation, and institutional arrangements. Although individual consumption may contribute to environmental protection, it cannot justify treating ordinary consumers as the primary agents responsible for the ecological crisis. Especially within the frameworks of consequentialism and intergenerational justice, the severity of environmental problems indicates only that someone must act, and cannot directly imply that ordinary consumers have a special consumption obligation.

Second, at the political level, green consumerism may obscure actors who truly control emissions and institutional power, when environmental responsibility is redefined as “what consumers choose”, firms, countries, and production systems acquire a kind of

moral separation. In this process, environmental responsibility is gradually marketized, consumerized, and individualized. Simultaneously, because green consumption often requires greater economic capacity, those with the greatest resources and the highest emissions are more likely to gain a responsible social image through it. Consumers with fewer resources and cannot afford green products are more likely to be seen as not green enough in environmental discourse. Therefore, green consumerism not only does not address inequalities in environmental problems, but may reinforce them on a moral level.

The third objection is ontological. Green consumerism relies on a particular understanding of the self and of nature. Green consumerism tends to understand environmental action as a process in which individual consumers reduce environmental harm through rational choice. Within this framework, the central moral agent is often the autonomous consumer, while nature appears primarily as something to be managed, protected, or used more responsibly. This thesis does not deny that human beings need to manage nature in certain ways. The problem, rather, is that green consumerism still tends to frame the relationship between humans and nature mainly as a subject-object relationship, rather than understanding humans as beings already embedded in ecological relations. Even in its green form, humans are still often understood as standing outside nature and influencing it through more responsible consumption. In this sense, green consumerism tends to reproduce a relatively individualistic conception of the subject, as well as a broader subject-object structure inherited from modern philosophy.

Therefore, this thesis develops and defends three objections to green consumerism. First, it argues that green consumerism misplaces environmental responsibility at the causal level by overemphasizing the moral significance of individual consumption. Second, it argues that green consumerism obscures structural inequalities and allows powerful institutional actors to evade responsibility. Third, it argues that green consumerism tends to reproduce an individualistic and subject-object understanding of the relationship between humans and nature.

II Green Consumerism: Historical Development and Normative Justifications

2.1 The Historical Development of Green Consumerism

Green consumerism is not a single, static theory but an environmental approach that emerged gradually in the second half of the twentieth century. In general, consumers can reduce environmental harm and influence markets by purchasing environmentally friendly products, avoiding highly polluting companies, reducing waste, and changing everyday consumption habits. In this sense, green consumerism provides ordinary individuals with a seemingly direct and practical way to participate in environmental action through daily consumption.

The emergence of green consumerism can be traced back to the environmental protection movements in Western Europe and North America in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century. During this period, industrial pollution, resource depletion, population growth and ecological damage gradually became significant public concerns. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is particularly important because it shows that environmental harm is not confined to distant factories or industrial sites, but is linked to food systems, household products, agriculture, and everyday life (Carson 1962). Environmental problems therefore came to be understood not only as matters of industrial pollution or government failure, but also as issues related to lifestyles, consumption patterns, and daily choices.

In this context, environmental organizations are increasingly encouraging individuals to reduce environmentally harmful forms of consumption. Movements against pollution, nuclear energy, overconsumption, single-use goods, CFC sprays and high-energy products are often accompanied by initiatives to recycle, save energy, reduce car use and rely more on public transport. These practices constituted an early form of green consumerism. In this form, environmental responsibility is increasingly linked to everyday life, and consumers are seen as actors who can participate in environmental protection through their own choice.

Since the 1980s, green consumerism has moved more clearly from the discourse of environmental movements into the discourse of the market (Peattie 1992). The figure of the green consumer began to appear in marketing, political science, and sociological research (Elkington and Hailes 1988; Micheletti 2003). Businesses and advertisers increasingly emphasized the environmental qualities of products, such as recyclable packaging, organic food, low-pollution production, and energy-efficient appliances. At the same time,

researchers began to identify and characterize the values and behaviors associated with green consumers (Peattie 1992). Green consumption was therefore no longer only a practice of environmental activists; it became a recognizable market category.

Green consumerism should also be understood within the broader framework of ethical and political consumerism. Ethical consumerism more generally refers to the fact that consumers can express moral and political values through market choices, such as boycotting goods produced by child labor, supporting fair trade, or avoiding purchasing products from exploitative businesses. Micheletti describes this broader phenomenon as treating “the market as an arena for politics” (Micheletti 2003). Green consumerism is a more specific environmental form of this wider practice. Its focus is not ethical consumption in general, but the use of consumer choice to reduce environmental harm and support more ecologically sustainable forms of production. Elkington and Hailes, for example, describe the green consumer as someone who avoids products that may “endanger health ... cause significant damage to the environment ... cause unnecessary waste ... adversely affect other countries.”(Elkington and Hailes 1988, 5)

From the 1990s onward, green consumerism became increasingly connected to the language of sustainable development and sustainable consumption. After the Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as development that meets present needs without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987, 54), environmental protection was increasingly framed as compatible with economic growth, market reform, and lifestyle change. Green consumption was no longer limited to avoiding certain polluting products. It expanded to include organic food, eco-labels, energy-efficient appliances, low-carbon travel, recycling, carbon footprint calculation, and other practices associated with sustainability. However, not all forms of ethical consumption automatically count as green consumption. Fair trade, for example, is primarily concerned with justice for producers and only becomes relevant to green consumerism when it is also connected to environmental aims such as sustainable agriculture or reduced ecological harm.

At the same time, green consumerism increasingly acquired cultural and symbolic significance. Buying organic food, supporting eco-friendly brands, reducing plastic use, or adopting a low-carbon lifestyle may be understood not only as environmentally friendly behaviour, but also as signs of being responsible, conscious, and morally aware. Nevertheless, green consumerism is only one possible form of individual environmental responsibility. Individuals may also act through political participation, environmental movements, community projects, or institutional reform. What distinguishes green

consumerism is that it expresses environmental responsibility primarily through consumption choices.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, green consumerism had become a widely accepted way of imagining environmental action. It responded to people's desire to participate in environmental protection in everyday life and offered a practical way to connect personal behaviour with ecological concern. However, this historical development also prepared the ground for the central problems examined in this thesis. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, green consumerism had become a widely accepted way of imagining environmental action. It responded to people's desire to participate in environmental protection in everyday life and offered a practical way to connect personal behaviour with ecological concern. At the same time, this historical development also raised a problem that will become central in the later chapters. As environmental responsibility became increasingly associated with private consumer action, larger questions about institutions, production systems, corporate power, and collective political change became less visible. Maniates describes this process as the individualization of responsibility: when environmental problems are framed as matters of private consumer action, there is "little room to ponder institutions." (Maniates 2001, 33) The following section reconstructs the normative justifications that make green consumerism attractive before the later chapters turn to its limitations.

2.2 The Normative Justifications of Green Consumerism

Green consumerism is not only a social movement or a set of consumer practices, but also a normative ethical position. At its core, it holds that individuals ought to reduce environmental harm through their consumption choices and use market behavior to promote more ecologically sustainable forms of production.

One important justification for green consumerism comes from consequentialism. Consequentialism is a family of moral theories according to which the moral value of an action, practice, or rule depends primarily on its consequences. Philosophical discussions of ethical consumption explicitly treat consequentialism as one important framework for evaluating consumer behavior (Barnett et al. 2005). Since green consumerism is a specifically environmental form of ethical consumption, it can also be understood through this framework. Green consumer literature does not always present this argument in formal philosophical terms, but its practical reasoning often has a consequentialist structure. Elkington and Hailes's *The Green Consumer Guide*, for example, encourages consumers to

avoid products that may endanger health, damage the environment, cause unnecessary waste, or negatively affect other countries (Elkington and Hailes 1988, 5). Similarly, Micheletti's account of political consumerism understands consumer action as a form of political participation, in which individual market choices can contribute to broader collective goals (Micheletti 2003, 25). Seyfang's work on sustainable consumption also presents changes in everyday consumption as connected to wider projects of environmental governance (Seyfang 2006). This consequentialist justification can take either an act-consequentialist or a rule-consequentialist form. In its act-consequentialist form, it asks whether a particular consumer choice, such as buying a less polluting product or avoiding a high-emission good, produces better environmental consequences. In its rule-consequentialist form, it asks whether a general rule or social practice of green consumption would produce better consequences if widely adopted. This second version is especially important for green consumerism, because its plausibility usually depends on cumulative effects. Many individual choices may increase demand for environmentally friendly products, put pressure on firms, shift market incentives, and support more ecologically sustainable forms of production.

The second important justification comes from intergenerational justice. Environmental damage not only affects the present but also destroys the living environment of future generations. Current consumption patterns might lead to climate instability, biodiversity loss, and ecological degradation that modern people may not have to bear yet, but future generations will suffer these consequences. From this perspective, individuals are responsible not only for those who exist now, but also for those who will live in the future. The Brundtland Report mentions that the sustainable development of the environment and the needs of the present should not be at the expense of the basic needs of future generations (WCED 1987, 54). Green consumerism, therefore, appears to be a way for individuals to reduce their own contribution to long-term ecological harm and help protect the ecological conditions needed for future generations.

Green consumerism is also supported by a broader discourse on sustainability. One reason for its popularity is that it seems to provide a practical and accessible way to respond to environmental issues within existing economic and social systems. Large-scale institutional reforms are often slow, politically difficult, and dependent on state action; Consumption choices, on the other hand, are instantaneous and exist in everyday life. Seyfang similarly presents sustainable consumption as a way to connect everyday practices with broader environmental governance, even if such practices occur outside of traditional

political systems (Seyfang 2006). In this sense, green consumerism promises a form of environmental action that can be integrated into everyday life without the need for a complete rejection of the market or the modern economic system.

In addition, some versions of green consumerism are not purely anthropocentric. Green consumption can also be justified through the idea that nature possesses intrinsic value independent of human interests. Environmental philosophers such as Aldo Leopold, Paul Taylor, and Holmes Rolston III argue in different ways that non-human nature deserves moral consideration beyond its usefulness to humans (Leopold 1949; Taylor 1986; Rolston III 1988). Leopold's land ethic, for example, famously claims that an action is right when it preserves "the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Leopold 1949, 224–25). From this perspective, environmentally destructive consumption is morally problematic because it damages beings and ecological systems that deserve respect. Consumers are therefore encouraged to avoid products associated with cruelty, deforestation, pollution, or ecological destruction, not only for the sake of human welfare, but also out of respect for nature itself. Green consumption can thus be interpreted as an attempt to express ecological concern and recognize the moral significance of the non-human world.

Finally, green consumerism can also be justified through virtue ethics. Under this interpretation, green consumption is not necessarily a strict personal moral obligation, but an expression of ecological virtue and responsible character. The practice of buying green products can be expressed as a virtue of caring for ecological consciousness. Environmental virtue ethicists such as Ronald Sandler argue that ecological problems should not be addressed only by rules and consequences, but should also be responded to by developing character traits that help improve the relationship between humans and nature (Sandler 2007). Green lifestyles are therefore valued not only because they produce better consequences, but because they cultivate morally admirable ways of living. In this framework, green consumerism is less about enforcing universal obligations and more about encouraging forms of character and conduct that are considered environmentally responsible and ethically praiseworthy.

Taken together, these arguments show that green consumerism is not merely a superficial market trend, but is supported by several serious ethical intuitions and normative commitments, including harm reduction, responsibility toward future generations, sustainability, respect for nature, and ecological virtue. The following chapters therefore do not reject environmental concern itself, but critically examine whether green consumerism provides an adequate understanding of ecological responsibility.

III Causal Misplacement: The Problem of Justifying Individual Environmental Duties

The previous chapter reconstructed one of the strongest possible justifications for green consumerism in consequentialist terms. According to this justification, green consumption is morally attractive because it is expected to reduce environmental harm and, if widely adopted, to contribute to better ecological outcomes. This argument can take both act-consequentialist and rule-consequentialist forms: it may focus either on the consequences of particular consumer choices or on the consequences of a general practice of green consumption. However, this chapter argues that even this stronger consequentialist justification does not successfully establish that ordinary consumers bear a special or primary environmental consumption obligation. The problem is not that individual consumption is entirely meaningless, but that green consumerism moves too quickly from the claim that ecological crises have serious consequences to the claim that ordinary consumers are the appropriate primary bearers of environmental responsibility. In large-scale environmental problems such as climate change, the most effective forms of action are often institutional or collective interventions, such as energy transition, industrial transformation, regulation of high-emission sectors, and national or international climate governance.

Furthermore, climate change is a typical collective causal problem. The changes in the global climate system are not caused by a single actor, but rather are the result of countless actions accumulated over a long period of time by many actors.(Hardin 1968) In this context, the impact of individual changes in consumption behavior on the overall climate system can be almost negligible. Just as Hardin pointed out in the “Tragedy of the Commons” model, when resources are openly shared and there is no coordination mechanism, even if each individual is only pursuing their own reasonable interests, their rational behavior may, at the collective level, lead to the destruction of resources (Hardin 1968). Baylor Johnson understands global warming as a contemporary manifestation of this tragedy of the commons structure(Johnson 2003). In his analysis, the atmosphere constitutes a global commons, and greenhouse gas emissions are analogous to the use of this commons. Individual emissions bring immediate convenience for people, while the resulting climate damage is highly dispersed in time and space, only becoming apparent after the accumulation of numerous actions. Johnson’s core argument against individual climate obligations can be summarized in three points:

- (1) No individual contribution produces harm.
- (2) The harm is a consequence of the aggregation of many separate actions.

(3) No individual can prevent the harm by unilateral action. (Johnson 2003, 279)

Based on this argument, Johnson denies that individuals have a moral obligation to reduce emissions by themselves. Since individuals, as users of the commons, can only control their own behavior and cannot control the use by others, they ultimately cannot avoid the tragedy of the commons. Therefore, demanding that they unilaterally stop emissions lacks moral basis. Johnson says: “The only reason to adopt unilateral restraint, however, is to avert a T of C. So if unilateral restraint cannot reasonably be expected to achieve its purpose, there is no reason, and hence no moral reason, to adopt it.” (Johnson 2003, 277)

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong also denies that ordinary individuals bear a unilateral moral obligation to reduce emissions in their daily lives. He first points out that collective moral responsibility does not automatically translate into individual moral obligations because “It should be clear from the start that ‘individual’ moral obligations do not always follow directly from ‘collective’ moral obligations.” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005, 295). Building on this, he establishes his core argument on a rigorous understanding of the harm principle: “We have a moral obligation not to perform an act that causes harm to others” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005, 297). In his view, an action constitutes a moral error only when it causes harm, and causing harm at least means that the action is a necessary or sufficient condition for the relevant harm. However, individual emissions clearly do not satisfy either of these causal conditions. As Sinnott-Armstrong emphasizes, “So my individual act is neither necessary nor sufficient for global warming”(Sinnott-Armstrong 2005, 297). Even if an individual completely ceases emissions, climate change will continue. And the emissions of a single individual are insufficient to trigger any specific climate disaster. Therefore, he concludes that individuals do not strictly cause climate harm, and thus there is no individual climate obligation based on the principle of harm.

Sinnott-Armstrong also considers the risk principle, according to which “We have a moral obligation not to increase the risk of harms to other people”(Sinnott-Armstrong 2005, 297). However, he argues that global warming, unlike drunk driving, does not clearly link a specific individual action to a specific victim. Under normal circumstances, we cannot identify which specific individual’s risk of harm is increased by a particular individual’s emissions. Therefore, the risk principle also struggles to provide a sufficient normative basis for individual-level climate obligations. Sinnott-Armstrong provides the example of driving an SUV on Sunday, by which he means taking a gas-guzzling SUV for a recreational drive, merely for pleasure rather than for any important practical need. He argues that although

such an act may seem wasteful, its impact on overall emissions is negligible. Emissions reductions at the individual level may be commendable, but they are not enough to elevate them to binding obligations that all individuals must fulfil.

Instead, imposing climate responsibility primarily on individual daily choices not only lacks a causal basis, but may also obscure the actors who are truly capable of taking action – governments, institutions, and collective decision-making mechanisms. The real actors obligated to address global warming are governments and institutions, because only they have the capacity to intervene through legislation and policy to fundamentally change the emissions structure, for example, by banning wasteful driving or restricting the production and sale of high-emission vehicles.

This can also be expressed in a consequentialist manner. If the goal is to achieve the best overall environmental outcome, then responsibility should first be directed towards those actors who have the greatest ability to change these outcomes. Therefore, compared to ordinary consumers, governments, large enterprises, high-emission groups, and other institutional actors have more reasons to be the main responsible parties, because they have a greater ability to reshape the energy system, regulate production, change infrastructure, and reduce emissions on a large scale. Heede (2014), by tracing historical emissions from 1854 to 2010, found that global climate change should not be understood as the equal result of all individuals' emissions, but is largely concentrated in the long-term emissions of a few large fossil fuel companies. "This analysis traces emissions totaling 914 GtCO₂e—63 % of cumulative worldwide emissions of industrial CO₂ and methane between 1751 and 2010—to the 90 'carbon major' entities." (Heede 2014, 229)

As discussed in Chapter 2, intergenerational justice provides another important justification for green consumerism. It shows that present generations have responsibilities toward future generations and should not destroy the ecological conditions on which future people will depend. However, this argument still does not determine how responsibility should be distributed among present agents. It shows that someone in the present must act, but it does not show that ordinary consumers, rather than states, corporations, high-emission groups, or other institutional actors, bear a special environmental consumption obligation.

Therefore, the same issue arises in the different justifications of green consumerism. Consequentialist reasoning indicates that environmental harm should be reduced, while the intergenerational justice argument suggests that the ecological conditions of future generations should be protected. However, neither of these arguments can prove that ordinary consumers should become the main bearers of environmental responsibility through

their consumption choices. The problem with green consumerism is not that it encourages individuals to care about the environment, but that it too quickly moves from the premise of “the ecological crisis requires action” to the conclusion that “individual consumers have specific consumption obligations”. In this process, the environmental responsibility has been misplaced at the causal level: a problem that should be handled through institutional coordination and collective action has been transformed into a moral issue of individual consumption behavior.

The next chapter will examine how this causal misplacement also becomes a political problem, because it obscures power relations and structural inequalities within systems of production and emissions.

IV Political Misplacement: Structural Inequality and Moral Greenwashing in Green Consumerism

4.1 Individualized Responsibility and Distributive Inequality

The previous chapter has already explained that consequentialist reasoning, the harm principle, and intergenerational justice can only indicate that environmental issues need to be addressed, but they cannot directly prove that ordinary consumers should bear the main responsibility. This chapter will discuss another issue: If we mainly understand environmental responsibility as a matter of consumption choices, then this responsibility will not be fairly distributed among everyone. Because consumption is not a simple personal choice; it is influenced by income, purchasing power, social status, the availability of green products, and the extent to which different people contribute to environmental damage. For this reason, environmental responsibility cannot be assessed simply by appealing to individuals as consumers. If differences in resources, capacities, emissions, and institutional positions are ignored, green consumerism may generate new forms of structural inequality.

When environmental issues are embedded within a consumption framework, climate action is gradually redefined as a matter of purchasing power. In other words, environmental protection largely becomes a matter of the ability to afford a green lifestyle, rather than a question of institutional reform or political action. This shift also brings about significant distributive justice issues. Different groups have different resources, so their ability to engage in green consumption also varies. Many green products are more expensive, such as organic food, environmentally certified goods, and low-carbon technologies. That is to say, only those who are relatively wealthy can more easily demonstrate their environmental responsibility by purchasing green products. As Henry Shue points out, when a shared public responsibility is required, the responsibility should not be equally distributed among all actors, but should consider the differences in resources and capabilities: “Among a number of parties, all of whom are bound to contribute to some common endeavour, the parties who have the most resources normally should contribute the most to the endeavour.” (Shue 1999, 537)

This indicates that environmental responsibility cannot be distributed merely based on the fact that everyone is a consumer. The economic capabilities, choice options and environmental impacts of different consumers are all different. Therefore, green consumerism will encounter a dilemma in this case. If green consumerism attributes the same environmental responsibility to all consumers, then it is unfair to those who have fewer

resources and fewer opportunities to choose green products. Low-income consumers often lack access to organic food, sustainable technologies, low-carbon transport, or more expensive environmentally certified goods. They may therefore be more dependent on cheaper but more environmentally harmful options. In this case, green consumerism ignores differences in capability and resources, and treats unequally situated individuals as if they had the same range of choices.

However, if green consumerism assigns greater responsibility to wealthier consumers, another problem emerges. Wealthier consumers are more able to fulfil green consumer responsibilities precisely because they have greater purchasing power. Wealthy consumers are more likely to buy organic food, eco-friendly brands, energy-efficient products, or carbon offsetting services, and therefore more likely to appear environmentally friendly and responsible. However, the problem is that their overall lifestyle may still consume more resources—for example, living in larger houses, flying more, and buying more things—resulting in higher emissions. Thus, green consumption may actually help them gain a better moral image, masking their higher actual consumption and emissions.

Numerous studies have shown that high-income groups have significantly higher per capita resource consumption and carbon emissions than low-income groups. Wiedmann et al., for example, argue that “the world’s top 10% of income earners are responsible for between 25 and 43% of environmental impact,” whereas “the world’s bottom 10% income earners exert only around 3–5% of environmental impact” (Wiedmann et al. 2020, 3).

In this sense, green consumerism creates a normative paradox. Those who contribute more to environmental damage may be better positioned to gain moral approval through green consumption, while those with fewer resources may be perceived as insufficiently green, even though they often contribute far less to ecological harm. Green consumerism therefore does not simply solve the problem of responsibility allocation; it may reproduce or even intensify existing inequalities by translating ecological responsibility into a matter of purchasing power.

4.2 The Commodity Form, Consumer Culture, and the Marketization of Responsibility

This paradox is not accidental, but closely related to the market logic upon which green consumerism relies. The reason why individualized responsibility occupies such a significant position in contemporary environmental discourse is not merely because of its moral appeal, but also because it highly aligns with the commodity forms and consumer

culture of modern capitalist society. Following Marx's analysis of the commodity form and commodity fetishism, I use the term "commodity form" to refer to the way in which social relations, labor processes, and environmental costs appear in the market as properties of commodities themselves. Marx argues that in commodity exchange, "the definite social relation between men themselves" assumes "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 1976, 165). In this sense, consumers encounter finished products, prices, labels, and brands, rather than the production relations, extraction processes, labor conditions, and ecological damage that make those products possible.

Therefore, when environmental issues are incorporated into the consumption framework, environmental responsibility is no longer primarily understood as a matter of production systems, energy structures, or institutional arrangements, but rather as a question of whether individuals have made the right choices. Environmental ethics is thus gradually transformed into a practice mediated by commodities. The power structure, division of labor, and institutional arrangements in the production process are hidden beneath the surface of commodity exchange, making social relations appear as free and voluntary choices between individuals. The commodity form therefore has a concealing function, because it makes structural problems appear as matters of individual choice.

This is crucial for understanding green consumerism. When environmental responsibility is understood as consumer choice, environmental issues become a question of what consumers should buy. Consumers are encouraged to buy green products, reduce their carbon footprint, support eco-friendly brands, and believe that as more people make the right choices, businesses will change their production methods, and society will become more sustainable. However, what truly determines what can be produced, what can be bought, and what qualifies as green remains the domain of businesses, capital, and institutions. Consumers appear to have freedom of choice, but this freedom is always within the existing market structure.

Therefore, green consumerism does not truly direct environmental responsibility towards the production system itself, but rather rephrases it as a consumption problem. Environmental damage is no longer primarily understood as a result of energy structure, capital accumulation, and institutional arrangements, but rather as a result of consumers not making the right choices. Responsibility thus shifts from the institutional level to the individual level, and this shift is precisely the obscuring effect of the commodity form.

The commodity form changes not only the way environmental responsibility is expressed, but also how responsibility becomes visible. This is a different problem from the

distributive inequality among consumers discussed in the previous section. The issue here is not primarily whether green consumption is equally available to rich and poor consumers, but whether a consumer-centered framework makes consumption more visible than production. To be clear, green consumerism does not necessarily deny corporate or institutional responsibility. Sincere advocates of green consumerism may also criticize corporations, expose high-emission industries, and call for structural change. The problem is rather that, once environmental responsibility is expressed mainly through commodity choice, consumer action becomes the most immediate and visible form of responsibility, while the production relations, supply chains, energy systems, and institutional arrangements behind commodities become less visible. In the market, what consumers usually see is merely the commodity itself: price, label, brand and packaging. They do not see the land, factories, energy, labor, extraction, pollution and waste behind the commodity. As a result, the commodity seems to be green, environmentally friendly or sustainable on its own, but the production process, labor relations and ecological costs behind it are hidden. As Marx further pointed out, “The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.”(Marx 1976, 164–65) Thus, problems that originate in production structures increasingly appear as matters of consumer choice.

At the same time, consumer culture further explains why this form of responsibility is widely accepted. In modern society, consumption is not only a means of satisfying needs, but also an important way of expressing identity, value, and social status. Thorstein Veblen termed this phenomenon conspicuous consumption, “Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure.” (Veblen 1899, 75) People consume not only to use goods, but also to display their taste, wealth, and status. This is particularly evident in green consumerism. Buying organic food, using environmentally friendly products, supporting fair trade, reducing plastic use, or choosing a low-carbon lifestyle are often understood not only as actions to reduce environmental impact, but also as a responsible lifestyle.

Green consumption has thus gradually become a morally significant symbol of identity. It not only expresses an individual’s concern for environmental issues but also projects a responsible, conscious, and tasteful social image. In this context, moral recognition begins to be linked to purchasing power. This problem appears in both horns of the dilemma discussed above. If green consumerism demands that all consumers bear the

same responsibility, it would be unfair to those with limited resources. Because they may not be able to afford organic food, sustainable products or low-carbon options, and yet might be judged as not environmentally friendly as a result.

However, if green consumerism requires affluent consumers to take on more responsibilities, the problem is not completely resolved. This is because affluent consumers have more money, so they are more likely to purchase green products, adopt low-carbon technologies, or lead an expensive sustainable lifestyle. In this way, they are more likely to gain a green and responsible image. However, overall, they may still consume more and emit more. Therefore, green consumerism may turn environmental responsibility into a new form of social distinction: the wealthy are more likely to acquire a green identity and moral recognition, while those with less resources are more likely to be regarded as less environmentally friendly.

More importantly, when green becomes a commodity attribute and a symbol of status, environmental politics itself begins to be reorganized by market logic. Issues that should have been decided through public discussion—such as what production methods are legitimate, which emissions should be limited, and who should bear the responsibility—are increasingly being decided by brands, certification systems, and consumer choices. Dauvergne and Lister point out that contemporary corporations are redefining environmental issues through sustainability and gradually replacing the state and public politics in environmental governance. They say: “It is shifting the power balance within the global political arena from states as the central rule makers and enforcers of environmental goals toward big-brand retailers and manufacturers acting to use ‘sustainability’ to protect their private interests.” (Dauvergne and Lister 2013, 2)

In other words, environmental issues are no longer primarily shaped through public discussion and democratic consultation, but are increasingly passively shaped by the market, brands, and green choices. In this context, green consumerism is not merely a pattern of consumption. It also changes how environmental responsibility is understood and assigned. Consumers are encouraged to act as citizens by making the right purchases, while corporations that control production and emissions can remain less visible. Individuals seem to have more room to maneuver, but these actions are always confined to the choices already provided by corporations. People may feel that buying green products, calculating their carbon footprint, and changing their lifestyles are ways of expressing their concern for the environment. However, these actions mostly occur within the market. In other words, people aren’t directly changing the systems, businesses, and production methods that cause

environmental problems; instead, they're expressing their dissatisfaction through what they buy. As a result, consumers may feel they've fulfilled their responsibilities, but the true relationship between them and the products—such as labor, pollution, resource extraction, and corporate responsibility—remains unseen. As Noddings argues, mere “caring about” often involves a form of distance and neglect:

I can ‘care about’ the starving children of Cambodia, send five dollars to hunger relief, and feel somewhat satisfied. I do not even know if my money went for food, or guns, or a new Cadillac for some politician. This is a poor second-cousin to caring. ‘Caring about’ always involves a certain benign neglect. (Noddings 2002, 22)

In the same way, green consumerism may allow consumers to feel morally satisfied without directly confronting the social and ecological relations behind the products they buy.

When social problems are transformed into consumption problems, people gain a kind of moral satisfaction through consumption without actually changing institutions and relationships. As a result, environmental problems are transformed into problems that appear solvable through consumption, while the underlying structures of production and the market logic that organize them remain largely unchanged.

4.3 Moral Greenwashing: Corporations, Capital, and “Green” Legitimacy

The previous section discussed how green consumerism can transform environmental responsibility into a matter of personal consumption. This section asks: when everyone is focused on what consumers should buy, what happens to companies that truly control production and emissions? This thesis argues that this may provide companies with an opportunity for “greenwashing.” Greenwashing refers to companies using green slogans, eco-friendly packaging, or a small number of sustainable products to appear responsible, without actually changing their environmentally problematic production methods.

In fact, global environmental damage is not caused equally by all individuals, but is largely concentrated in a few large corporations, energy systems, and institutional actors. Heede’s study of historical emissions from 1854 to 2010 shows that:

Cumulative emissions attributed to the twenty largest investor-owned and state-owned energy companies between 1854 and 2010 total 428 GtCO_{2e}, or 29.5% of global industrial emissions from 1751 to 2010. The ten largest investor-owned companies alone contributed 230 GtCO_{2e}, or 15.8% of global emissions through 2010. (Heede 2014, 234)

While climate change is a result of long-term accumulation, this accumulation is not caused by the average of countless ordinary consumers, but rather largely by the continuous emissions of a few large fossil fuel companies. However, in the framework of green consumerism, environmental issues are increasingly understood as matters of consumer choice. Individuals are urged to take many forms of personal action, while the role of

corporations, capital, and institutional actors in environmental crises receives less attention in responsibility discussions. Responsibility is therefore redistributed in a way that makes individual consumers the most visible and easily blamed actors, while those with greater power over emissions and institutions retreat into the background.

This shift in responsibility is not accidental, but closely related to the ability of capitalist corporations to absorb environmental discourse. As Dauvergne and Lister point out, contemporary large corporations increasingly transform sustainability into a new business language and competitive strategy: “These ‘big brands’ are defining sustainability and implementing it through their operations and supply chains to gain competitive advantages and increase sales and profits.” (Dauvergne and Lister 2013, 1)

Companies don’t need to truly change their production logic. All they need to do is add green elements to their existing business models—such as eco-friendly packaging, carbon neutrality, sustainable lines, or green brands—to create a responsible public image.

Therefore, green consumerism creates a peculiar illusion that as if consumers determine production through their purchases, as if the market will respond to consumers’ green demands. But in reality, what truly determines what can be produced, what can be purchased, and what is considered green remains the domain of corporations and capital. Corporations do not passively respond to consumer demand.

On the contrary, enterprises use supply chains, certifications, advertising and market rules to determine what consumers can buy, what they should buy themselves, and what kind of consumption can be considered responsible. Therefore, green consumerism has not truly handed over environmental power to consumers; instead, it has allowed consumers to continue making choices within the market framework set by enterprises. Consumers are encouraged to believe that as long as they purchase green products, they are participating in environmental actions. However, in reality, environmental issues are still confined within the consumption scope that enterprises can control.

Dauvergne and Lister thus point out that the sustainability driven by contemporary businesses is not aimed at the continued survival of people and nature, but primarily at the continued growth of the business itself: “Eco-business is fundamentally aiming for sustainability of big business, not sustainability of people and the planet.” (Dauvergne and Lister 2013, 2) The problem, then, is not simply that businesses fail to reduce production and consumption as such, but that corporate sustainability often leaves the underlying logic of growth, expansion, and profit maximization largely intact. It seeks to make business growth

appear greener, while the overall ecological pressures generated by expanding production and consumption may continue.

Therefore, even if individual products become more environmentally friendly, it does not mean that overall environmental pressure will decrease. Research by Dauvergne and Lister shows that while some goods may see improvements in per-unit energy, water, or material consumption, overall consumption continues to increase: “The total environmental impacts of consumption, moreover, continue to increase even as the per-unit energy, material, water, and waste impacts of producing, consuming, and disposing of some consumer goods are declining.”(Dauvergne and Lister 2013, 23)

In other words, a product becoming more environmentally friendly doesn’t mean the entire production process has become more environmentally friendly. If companies produce and sell more, the overall environmental pressure will still increase. This is the problem of greenwashing. Companies can continue their high-emission, high-consumption, high-profit model while launching a few green products and engaging in environmental propaganda to make themselves appear responsible. For example, oil companies continue developing fossil fuels but promote investments in new energy sources; fast fashion companies continue mass production but launch sustainable lines. In these cases, green doesn’t represent a real change, but merely improves the company’s image.

More importantly, green consumerism not only fails to eliminate the capitalist logic of externalizing costs but may actually reinforce it in new ways. By cost externalization, I mean the process through which companies do not bear the full social and environmental costs of production, but shift these costs onto others, such as workers, small suppliers, local communities, ecosystems, or future generations. In the context of green consumerism, this logic may even be reinforced in new ways. In order to offer products that appear both green and affordable, companies may transfer environmental and social costs further up the supply chain, especially onto those with the least power to resist them. This is why Dauvergne and Lister argue that part of the value of eco-business lies in its capacity to shift costs upstream onto “small suppliers and low-paid labor” (Dauvergne and Lister 2013, 3).

This argument is closely connected to Maria Mies’s analysis of capitalism. Mies argues that capitalist accumulation depends on forms of labour and nature that are indispensable to production but are excluded from full recognition within the market, including women’s unpaid labour, small-scale farming, colonized peoples and territories, and nature. When she describes these as colonies, she is using the term not only in the literal historical sense, but also in a metaphorical sense: they are treated as external domains whose

productive capacities can be appropriated at very low cost. As she writes, “For capitalists all these are ‘colonies’ whose production can be appropriated almost free of costs” (Mies 1986, xvi). In other words, capitalist profit depends on the continuous appropriation of invisible, unpaid, or undervalued labour and nature.

Green consumerism won’t necessarily change this logic of cost shifting. Companies can still transfer pollution, lower supply chain costs, and appropriate natural resources while simultaneously portraying themselves as green, sustainable, or responsible. To be sure, there may be difficult cases in which ecological transition raises costs and some costs must be redistributed. The problem is not simply that environmental responsibility has costs, but that green consumerism often leaves the distribution of these costs to market mechanisms and corporate supply chains. Without democratic control, public regulation, and principles of justice, the costs of green transition may again fall on those least able to bear them: small suppliers, low-paid workers, local communities, or already disadvantaged groups.

Vandana Shiva’s critique of the global agricultural system also illustrates this point. She points out that in the global agricultural system, what people can eat, what the market can provide, and which production methods are permitted are not truly determined by consumers, but by multinational corporations that control seeds, land, intellectual property, and market rules: “The right of corporations to force-feed citizens of the world with culturally inappropriate and hazardous foods has been made absolute.”(Shiva 2000, 18) However, in the discourse of green consumerism, environmental issues are still rephrased as matters of consumer choice and individual farming practices, rather than as questions about corporate control over seeds, land, intellectual property, and markets.

This shows that green consumerism may not really change the problem. Instead, it may simply make the existing system of production and consumption appear more responsible. The key is not just whether products become greener, but whether the production relations, cost distribution and power structure behind the products become more just.

Therefore, the issue in this chapter is not just whether companies can use green to whitewash their image, but rather that green consumerism brings two deeper problems: First, it links environmental image with purchasing power, potentially exacerbating inequality among consumers; second, it portrays environmental action as a matter of consumer choice, making the responsibilities of corporations, capital, and institutions less apparent. In this way, those entities most capable of changing production and emissions may gain new legitimacy through a green image, while the pressure of responsibility is shifted to consumers.

V Ontological Misplacement of Responsibility: Cartesian Individualism in Green Consumerism

5.1 Green Consumerism and the Cartesian Subject–Object Framework

In the previous two chapters, this thesis analyzed how green consumerism misplaces environmental responsibility at the causal and political levels. However, if we further inquire why this misplacement of responsibility repeatedly appears in environmental ethics discourse, the problem is no longer merely about causal structure or political structure, but involves a deeper philosophical premise that green consumerism is largely based on a highly individualistic view of the relationship between humanity and nature.

To understand this, we can first examine the view of the human–nature relationship that is foregrounded in green consumerism. Green consumerism does not necessarily claim that market exchange is the only way in which humans relate to nature. However, it tends to make market-mediated consumer choice the primary practical route through which environmental responsibility is expressed. Within this framework, humans respond to ecological crisis mainly as consumers: they buy greener products, avoid environmentally harmful goods, reduce their carbon footprints, or support eco-friendly brands. Nature, in turn, appears primarily through the environmental impacts of commodities and the choices available within the market.

Nature (resources) → Producers (extraction and processing) → Commodities → Consumers (selection and purchase)

Here, this thesis does not claim that all justifications for green consumerism take the human–nature relationship as their only or central moral concern. As Chapter 2 has shown, green consumerism may also be justified by consequentialist reasoning, intergenerational justice, sustainable development, or green virtue ethics. The point of this chapter is more specific: when these different moral concerns are translated into market-mediated consumer choice, green consumerism tends to foreground a particular way of relating to nature. Even if the ultimate moral concern is future generations or sustainability, the practical response is often framed as choosing between commodities with different environmental impacts.

In this market-mediated structure, green consumerism does not necessarily deny the intrinsic value of nature. However, the problem is that nature is often not directly presented to consumers but appears through goods: it becomes resources, raw materials, product labels and environmental impacts. What consumers confront is not forests, rivers, land or production processes, but green or non-green goods on the market. Therefore, the

relationship between humans and nature is mediated by commodities, prices, labels and market intermediaries. Green consumerism does not truly change this structure; it merely adds a moral choice: consumers are encouraged to purchase products that cause less harm.

However, this selection mechanism does not truly change the fundamental form of the relationship between humans and nature. Nature still remains as an object that needs to be utilized, managed, protected or reduced in harm, while humans remain the ones making the choices. As a result, the relationship between humans and nature is reduced to a choice relationship between consumers and commodities, rather than a mutually dependent one.

Philosophically, this relation is close to a broadly Cartesian subject–object dualism. In Descartes’s philosophy, the thinking subject is separated from the external material world. This makes the human subject appear as if it stands outside the world, facing an external object that can be known, used, and controlled (Descartes 1984).

Within this framework, nature can appear as an object to be known, used, and controlled, while the human subject appears as the center of action and decision-making. This subject-centered framework has deeply influenced modern scientific, economic, and ethical thought. In ethics, the moral agent is often understood as an individual capable of making independent choices, and moral responsibility is often understood in relation to individual action. When this framework is applied to environmental ethics, environmental problems can easily be interpreted as consequences of individual behavior, and environmental responsibility can be understood primarily as a matter of individual choice.

Green consumerism can be understood as operating within this subject-centered framework. It presents humans primarily as independent, autonomous agents capable of influencing the environment through rational calculation and consumption choices. Nature, in turn, tends to appear as an external object to be managed, protected, or used more responsibly. Environmental responsibility is thus understood as a question of how agents can treat their external environment more responsibly. Environmental problems are interpreted as partly resulting from consumer demand, and the proposed solution is to change consumer choices. At first sight, this model seems to enhance individual moral agency. At a deeper philosophical level, however, it still tends to maintain the separation between humans and nature.

5.2 Deep Ecology's Critique: From "Man-in-Environment" to the Ecological Self

The previous section argued that green consumerism tends to express ecological responsibility through a subject-centered and market-mediated framework. This does not mean that green consumerism must always deny the intrinsic value of nature. As Chapter 2 has shown, some versions of green consumerism may indeed be motivated by respect for nature itself. Consumers may avoid products connected to deforestation, animal cruelty, pollution, or habitat destruction because they believe that non-human nature has value independently of human use. The problem, however, is that when this concern is translated primarily into consumer choice, nature still tends to appear as something whose condition can be improved by buying, avoiding, or replacing commodities. Even when nature is valued, the practical response remains centered on the consumer's choice within the market.

This is where deep ecology becomes important. Deep ecology does not merely ask how environmental harm can be reduced within existing patterns of production and consumption. It asks a deeper question: what kind of understanding of the human–nature relationship makes ecological destruction appear normal in the first place? In his distinction between “shallow ecology” and “deep ecology,” Arne Næss argues that shallow ecology focuses mainly on fighting pollution and resource depletion, while its central objective remains the protection of human health and affluence, especially in developed countries (Naess 1973, 95). This does not mean that every concern for human well-being or future generations is morally unimportant. Concern for future generations may be a serious ethical concern. However, if the ultimate value of nature is still understood only in terms of human welfare, whether present or future, then the view remains anthropocentric. Deep ecology challenges precisely this assumption by asking whether non-human nature has value independently of its usefulness to human beings.

Green consumerism tends to rely on a subject-centered and market-mediated view of the relationship between humanity and nature. They can reduce pollution, encourage resource conservation, and promote products with less harm. However, the problem is that they usually do not truly inquire into the consumer society, the growth model, and the premise that nature is a resource that needs to be managed. This does not mean that all green consumption is without value. People influenced by deep ecology can certainly consume less, avoid destructive products, or support practices that cause less harm to nature. The problem is that if green consumerism merely allows consumers to choose greener products

within the existing commodity system, then it does not achieve the deeper changes required by deep ecology. It changes only the consumption choices, rather than the lifestyle, desires, and institutions that support these choices.

Næss's deep ecology therefore goes beyond simply addressing pollution and resource depletion. It raises deeper questions: why does modern society so readily understand nature as a resource? Why is the value of nature so often made dependent on its usefulness to human beings? Is the environmental crisis simply the result of flawed consumption choices, or does it arise from a more fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between humans and nature? Næss argues that one of the central problems of modern environmental thinking is the "man-in-environment" image. In this image, human beings and nature are first separated: humans are the subjects, while nature is the surrounding environment; humans are the actors, while nature is the object of action. Environmental responsibility is then understood as the question of how the human subject can better manage its external environment.

Against this image, Næss proposes the "relational, total-field image" and explicitly calls for the "rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image" (Naess 1973, 95). On this view, human beings are not self-contained subjects standing outside nature. From the beginning, they exist in relations with land, water, air, animals, plants, ecosystems, and other forms of life. Næss describes organisms as "knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations" (Naess 1973, 95). A living being is therefore not an isolated unit that first exists independently and then enters into relations. Rather, it is partly constituted by the relations in which it lives. If these relations are fundamentally changed, the being itself is also changed.

Deep ecology thus offers a critique of anthropocentrism. It rejects the idea that value belongs only to human beings and that non-human life matters only because it serves human purposes. Næss argues that restricting value to humans is "an anthropocentrism with detrimental effects upon the life quality of humans themselves" (Næss 1973, 96). This is not merely the claim that environmental destruction is bad for humans in a narrow instrumental sense. Rather, it suggests that a human-centered worldview damages both non-human life and human life, because it misunderstands the relational conditions through which life itself is sustained.

The key ethical claim of deep ecology is that nature has intrinsic value independent of human interests. Næss calls this principle "biospherical egalitarianism" (Naess 1973, 95). On this view, all living beings have an "equal right to live and blossom" (Naess 1973, 96). This value does not depend on whether a life form provides resources, food, beauty, or

services for human beings. It belongs to living beings as participants in a wider ecological field. For this reason, deep ecology criticizes not only anthropocentrism, but also consumerism and developmentalism. Once nature is understood as intrinsically valuable, a social model based on unlimited growth, expanding consumption, and continuous resource extraction becomes not only ecologically self-defeating, but also ethically problematic. Environmental responsibility is therefore not only about seeking greener products. It also requires asking whether modern consumer society produces desires and lifestyles that are themselves based on a distorted relationship with nature.

This point becomes clearer in Næss's concept of the "ecological self." He writes: "Therefore, I tentatively introduce, perhaps for the very first time, the concept of ecological self. We may be said to be in, and of, Nature from the very beginning of our selves" (Næss et al. 2005, 516). Unlike the closed, autonomous, and independent self often presupposed in modern individualism, the ecological self is formed through relations. Moral development is not simply the strengthening of individual independence, but the expansion of identification beyond the narrow ego. The self can come to identify not only with personal interests, family, or community, but also with other living beings and the broader ecological field.

In this sense, harming nature is also harmful to the self, but only because the self has been understood in an expanded and relational way. This is not a return to narrow human self-interest. Rather, it means that the boundary between self and other has been transformed. If the self includes relations with other beings, then care for nature is not merely an external duty imposed on an isolated subject. As Næss puts it, "if your self (in the wide sense) embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care. Surely you care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it" (Næss et al. 2005, 525). Ecological responsibility is therefore grounded not only in obligation, but in identification and relational belonging.

Therefore, deep ecology holds that the problem with green consumerism is not merely that the consumption choices are not good enough, but that it still regards humans as a subject who stands outside nature and manages nature through choices. Green consumption has certain value in reducing harm, but if it merely stops at what should I buy, it does not truly change the relationship between humans and nature. Environmental responsibility should further inquire: How should humans understand their interdependent relationship with nature?

5.3 Ecofeminist Critique: From the “Expanded Self” to the Logic of Domination

Ecofeminism is an important direction in environmental philosophy. It focuses on why nature is dominated by humans, and why women and other vulnerable groups are dominated—the logic often resonates with these questions. Ecofeminism argues that ecological destruction stems not only from humanity’s separation from nature, but also from the fact that modern thought often divides the world into hierarchical structures. For example, reason is seen as superior to emotion, culture to nature, men to women, and humans to non-human nature (Warren 1990; Plumwood 1993).

From this perspective, the problem is not only that humans falsely see themselves as separate from nature, but that this separation is organized as a relation of domination. However, ecofeminism argues that deep ecology has not completely escaped the logic of the subject. In the concept of the “ecological self,” nature is often valued because it is incorporated into a larger self. Nature is no longer an object opposed to the self, but it also doesn’t seem to exist truly as an independent other. Rather, it becomes part of the “expanded I.” In this way, the difference between humans and nature disappears, and nature loses its independence as an other.

For this reason, while deep ecology successfully critiques anthropocentrism and the subject-object dualism, it may still retain subject-centrism in another way that it no longer establishes the subject by dominating nature, but overcomes separation by absorbing nature into a larger subject. Ecological feminism further points out that the problem is not merely that humans and nature are separated; More importantly, humans have turned this difference into a reason for dominating nature. Ecological feminism does not claim that humans and nature are exactly the same, nor does it seek to eliminate the differences between them. Instead, it advocates a relationship that acknowledges both the connection and the differences. That is to say, humans and nature are interdependent, but nature is not merely a part of the human self, nor should it be absorbed or controlled by humans. As Plumwood states, “Respect for others involves acknowledging their distinctness and difference, and not trying to reduce or assimilate them to the human sphere.” (Plumwood 1993, 174) Therefore, the root cause of environmental problems is not that humans mistakenly believe they are independent of nature, nor is it that humans do not realize they belong to nature; rather, it is that humans interpret the differences between themselves and nature as a hierarchical

relationship. The problem is not the differences themselves, but that the differences are used to justify domination.

Warren calls this structure the logic of domination, stating that “a logic of domination assumes that superiority justifies subordination.” (Warren 2000, 47) Western intellectual tradition has long used a specific mode of reasoning to transform the difference between humans and nature into a justifiable domination of nature by humans. She summarizes this reasoning as follows: “The logic of domination is necessary both to turn diversity (or difference) into domination and to justify that domination.” (Warren 2000, 49)

Warren explains that Western thought has often followed a pattern like this:

- (1) Humans do, and plants and rocks do not, have the capacity to consciously and radically change the communities in which they live in self-determined ways.
- (2) Whatever has the capacity to consciously and radically change the community in which it lives in self-determined ways is morally superior to whatever lacks this capacity.
- (3) Therefore, Humans are morally superior to plants and rocks.
- (4) If X is morally superior to Y, then X is justified in subordinating Y.
- (5) Therefore, Humans are justified in subordinating plants and rocks. (Warren 2000, 49)

The problem with this logic is not simply that it privileges humans, but that it contains two unjustified moves. First, it transforms “different” into “higher and lower”. That is to say, because humans have some abilities that plants and stones do not have, humans are considered more advanced and more valuable. Ecofeminism does not deny the differences between humans and nature; instead, it opposes directly converting these differences into a value hierarchy. Second, it also transforms “more advanced” into “dominatable”. But even if a being is more capable in certain aspects, it does not mean that it has the right to control, utilize, or sacrifice another being. For Warren, this is the logic of domination: first, explain the differences as inferior, and then use this inferior status to justify domination.

Some beings, because they are more rational, more autonomous, and more conscious, are given higher value. While those deemed lacking these capabilities are placed in lower positions and thus become objects to be exploited, managed, and sacrificed. Patriarchy establishes a hierarchical system of values through this logic of domination. In this system, reason is superior to emotion, culture to nature, male to female, and subject to object. Values are arranged according to a metaphorical upper-lower order, those at the upper level are considered more valuable and more worthy of protection, while those at the lower level are considered inferior, more passive, and less important. Therefore, the domination of those at higher levels over those at lower levels is seen as natural, reasonable, and even morally justified.

While green consumerism appears to advocate for nature conservation, it is actually still built upon this hierarchical structure. It hasn't truly abandoned the hierarchical division between humans and nature. Rather, it attempts to make the upper level human subject manage the lower level nature in a more responsible way. Nature remains placed in a position of being chosen, protected, and managed, while humans remain the subjects of decision-making, evaluation, and action. The relationship between humans and nature hasn't truly shifted from dominance to coexistence.

It is in this sense that Plumwood points out that the Western intellectual tradition has long been built on a series of master-servant binary oppositions. Plumwood argues

The logic of domination and the deep structures of dualism create 'blind spots' in the dominant culture's understanding of its relationship to the biosphere, understandings which deny dependency and community to an even greater degree than in the case of human society." (Plumwood 1993, 194)

This logic manifests not only in human domination over nature, but also in male domination over female, rationality over emotion, civilization over savagery, and colonizers over the colonized. They share the same structure that legitimizing control over others by portraying them as inferior, dependent, passive, and lacking rationality.

Plumwood emphasizes that this dominant logic sustains itself through multiple mechanisms. First, it excludes nature from human reason and subjectivity. Nature is described as a silent, unconscious, and purposeless existence, thus passively awaiting human utilization and management. Second, it homogenizes nature into an undifferentiated background resource. Land, rivers, forests, animals, and soil are all reduced to the abstract category of resource, losing their concreteness and independence. Finally, it reduces the value of nature entirely to instrumental value that nature is important only because it can satisfy human purposes. In other words, it constantly creates distance between humans and nature. This distance is not only epistemological but also exists in social institutions and daily life. Urbanization, industrialized production, and global commodity chains make it increasingly difficult for people to directly perceive their interdependence with nature. Furthermore, it transforms nature into an invisible background resource through a mechanism of backgrounding (Plumwood 1993, 153). As Plumwood points out, subjects in modern market societies maintain the illusion of independence and self-sufficiency by denying their dependence on the other. Nature is contextualized as a self-evident prerequisite for market activities, treated as a backdrop for absorbing waste and providing unlimited resources, only becoming truly noticeable when it can no longer fulfill these functions. For example, when a consumer buys a piece of meat, a bag of vegetables, or a piece of clothing

in a supermarket, they are only facing the packaged goods, not the animals, land, water, labor, and ecosystems behind them. The originally concrete, embodied, and interdependent relationship between humans and nature is transformed into a highly abstract market relationship. Consumers no longer need to face slaughtered animals, polluted rivers, or felled forests. They only need to face the choices on the shelf.

Green consumerism has not shortened this distance. Rather, it has institutionalized it to some extent. It tells people that you don't need to truly change your relationship with nature, nor do you need to re-enter the land, communities, and ecosystems. You need to choose products labeled organic, eco-friendly, and sustainable in the supermarket to fulfill your environmental responsibility. Green consumerism fails to truly address the ecological crisis precisely because it remains within a subject-centered ontology that it assumes the existence of an independent consumer subject who influences an external natural object through choices. Ecofeminism, however, points out that what truly needs to be changed is not consumer choice, but the very structure of the subject-object, upper-lower, and human-nature relationship.

Therefore, the problem of the ecological crisis is not merely whether humanity cares enough about nature, but how humanity understands its relationship with nature. The problem with green consumerism is not that it's not green enough, but that it still retains a subject standing outside of nature, managing it through choice. What truly needs to be changed is not consumer preferences, but this view of the subject itself. As Plumwood emphasizes, we cannot remain in the separation of viewing nature as an external object, nor can we remain in the integration of absorbing nature into the "expanded self". We need a new relational subject, one that acknowledges both dependence and difference. We need a new relational subject: one that acknowledges both dependence and difference, rejects domination, and does not erase the otherness of nature.

VI Normative Alternative: Ecological Responsibility as Relational Repair

6.1 From the Misplacement of Responsibility to Relational Repair

The previous two chapters discussed critiques at the causal and political levels. This chapter will discuss, at the ontological level, that green consumerism has not truly changed the separation between humans and nature, but rather has re-expressed ecological responsibility as the personal choice of consumers.

First, green consumerism presupposes an independent, autonomous and rational consumer subject. This individual possesses the ability to make free choices, and is thus considered to be responsible for their own consumption behavior. However, this view of the subject neglects an important fact: individuals are always situated within social, ecological and institutional relationships. The ability to make choices is not innate but is shaped by income, status, institutions, infrastructure and cultural conditions. When environmental responsibility is understood as personal responsibility, it may lead to the perception of consumers as seemingly having similar capabilities, resources and action spaces. In reality, different entities occupy different positions within the network of relationships, and therefore cannot bear the same responsibility. As Joan Tronto points out, the core of democratic politics is not merely “who got what,” but first and “who is responsible for caring for what, when, where, and how” (Tronto 2013, 46). Responsibility is not an abstract and universal moral burden, but a political practice that should be allocated according to relationships, capabilities, and power. From this perspective, environmental responsibility no longer means that “everyone should bear the same obligations”, but rather that different entities should assume different forms of responsibility based on their positions, capabilities and influence within the relationship network. Governments, large corporations, and high-emission groups, due to their greater resources, influence, and emissions contributions, should bear greater ecological responsibility. Ordinary individuals, on the other hand, should bear more responsibility for participating in, supporting, and changing relationships, rather than being required to unilaterally shoulder the burden of the environmental crisis.

Secondly, while green consumerism doesn’t explicitly deny the responsibility of corporations, states, and institutions, it tends to place the emphasis of environmental responsibility on individual consumers, shaping personal consumption choices as the most direct, important, and readily practiced form of responsibility. Within this framework, structural responsibility, though not openly denied, easily becomes secondary, even invisible. This is where Tronto’s critique of personal responsibility is relevant. Tronto argues that “Personal responsibility can have a profoundly anti-democratic effect” (Tronto 2013, 42) , because when collective problems are framed primarily as matters of individual responsibility, they are removed from public debate about institutions, power, and the distribution of resources. Applied to green consumerism, this means that environmental responsibility may appear as a matter of what individuals choose to buy, rather than as a political question about who controls resources, emission capacity, and institutional power. Therefore, environmental problems are not merely a matter of individual behavior, but

primarily a problem of disrupted relationships. The ecological crisis does not arise merely from flawed choices made by certain individuals. It also arises from the way capitalist production, market logic, and subject–object dualism sever, obscure, and commodify the interdependence between humans and nature, between humans and others, and between present and future generations. Environmental problems are primarily a relational crisis, not simply a behavioral one.

If the ecological crisis is a crisis of relationships, then environmental responsibility should not primarily be understood as the obligations of individual consumers, but rather as relational repair. This does not mean that green consumption is meaningless. Buying less, reducing waste, and avoiding destructive products can still be valuable actions. However, they cannot be the core of ecological responsibility. Their value lies in whether they can participate in broader relational repair, such as repairing the damaged relationships between humans and nature, humans and others, and contemporary people and future generations. Here, repair does not mean that humans stand outside nature to manage it, nor does it mean reverting to some romanticized state of harmony. Instead, it is about making hidden relationships visible again, reducing domination, and rebuilding the conditions for coexistence. As Tronto said, care encompasses everything we do to “maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’” (Tronto 2013, 19). Therefore, environmental ethics is not just about what I should buy, but about how we should live together, make joint decisions, and restore relationships.

After grounding relational repair in Tronto’s account of care, Haraway and Noddings help clarify the ontological background of this view. Haraway’s concept of “sympoiesis” shows why repair should not be understood as humans standing outside nature and managing it from above. For Haraway, human beings have never existed in isolation, but are always situated within networks of relations involving other species, microorganisms, technologies, and ecosystems. Humans do not first exist as complete individuals and then enter into relations; rather, relations are part of what makes human existence possible. As Haraway writes, “Sympoiesis means ‘making-with’; nothing makes itself” (Haraway 2016, 58). This indicates that ecological responsibility is not about managing nature from the outside, but about responding to, maintaining, and restoring the relationship between humans and nature within the context of our existing relationship.

Noddings’s relational account of the self makes a similar point. She argues that we do not need an image of the self as an independent and autonomous subject prior to relations, but “a thoroughly relational description” (Noddings 2002, 3). The self is formed through

encounters with others, things, and events in the world; it is not complete before these relations occur (Noddings 2002, 116). Applied to ecological responsibility, this means that humans do not first become complete subjects and then face nature as an external object. Rather, human beings are already formed through relations with nature, other people, institutions, and the material conditions that sustain life. Relational repair therefore does not mean managing nature from the outside. It means recognizing, maintaining, and transforming the relations within which human and non-human life are already entangled.

From this perspective, humanity is not a closed entity capable of independently assuming responsibility, but an existence constantly constituted by relationships. Therefore, the ecological crisis is not merely due to certain wrongdoings by people, but rather a problem with the relationships between humans and nature, humans and animals, humans and the land, and humans and future generations. These relationships have been severed and obscured by the capitalist mode of production, market logic, and subject-object dualism, and have been turned into things that can be bought, sold, and exploited. True environmental responsibility should therefore not simply require individual consumers to make greener choices, but should involve re-establishing non-dominating relationships between humans and nature. Humans are neither subjects independent of nature, nor should they erase difference by claiming “I am nature.” Instead, they should acknowledge that they always live in interdependent relationships with other life forms, and that these others are both connected to us and not identical with us.

6.2 Care Ethics and the Relational Foundation of Responsibility

Ecological responsibility is a relational responsibility, and perhaps the most suitable term to describe it is not rights, rules, or outcomes in traditional ethics, but care. Traditional environmental ethics often centers on obligations, rights, or outcomes. Green consumerism is similar in this respect: it attempts to solve environmental problems by defining how a good consumer should act. However, this model still views environmental ethics as an obligation of the subject toward the object, without fundamentally altering the relationship between humans and nature. In contrast, the theory of care ethics holds that morality is not about isolated individuals making judgments based on rules, but rather responding to needs within relationships. Care is not merely an emotional concern, but rather involves actually maintaining and repairing relationships. Tronto defines care broadly as everything we do to “maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto 2013, 19)

In Tronto's view, our world includes not only interpersonal relationships but also the body, the environment, institutions, and all the conditions necessary to sustain life. Caring therefore has an ecological dimension: it means not only caring for others, but also maintaining the networks of relationships that make life possible. From this perspective, environmental responsibility should not be understood as a question of how subjects can manage nature more effectively, but rather as a question of how we care for, maintain, and repair the damaged relationship between humans and nature.

However, not all relationships are worth maintaining. The ethics of care differ from mere "care" or "maintenance" in that it requires us to reflect on what kind of relationship we are maintaining. Patriarchy, the capitalist mode of production, and the dominant relationship between humanity and nature are also relationships. If we merely maintain the existing relationship, care may become a continuation of oppression. Therefore, relational repair is not about restoring any old human-nature relationship, but about establishing a better one. As Tronto emphasizes, true "caring with" means: "'Caring with' requires that caring needs and how they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all." (Tronto 2013, 23)

Therefore, care is not about unconditionally preserving existing relationships, but about reflecting on and changing them so that they are no longer based on domination. Ecological responsibility aims to repair not the relationship of human control, possession, and utilization of nature, but a relationship that acknowledges interdependence, respects differences, and rejects domination. The ecological crisis is not just because humans have done something wrong, but also because modern society has long treated nature as a resource, an object, and a commodity. While green consumerism demands more responsible consumption, it hasn't truly changed this relationship. Nature remains an object waiting to be chosen, managed, and purchased, and environmental responsibility is still understood as an individual's obligation to external nature.

Therefore, ecological responsibility, as a relational repair, does not primarily require people to buy green products, but rather to re-enter those relationships severed by market logic. For example, it involves reinterpreting the relationship between food and land, rather than simply viewing food as a supermarket commodity; the relationship between consumption and labor, rather than focusing only on the commodity itself; the relationship between cities and ecosystems, rather than treating nature as a background outside the city; and the interdependence between humans and animals, plants, rivers, and air, rather than viewing them as passive resources.

So, ecological responsibility is no longer about consuming greener, but about living more relationally. Living more relationally means not only that individuals become more conscious in their daily lives, but also that we collectively change the institutional conditions that constantly sever, obscure, and commodify relationships. For care to truly become the foundation of ecological responsibility, it must shift from private virtue to public and political practice. True “shared care” is not about each person bearing responsibility alone, but about collectively deciding in the public sphere which relationships need to be maintained, which need to be changed, and how we should reorganize the relationships between humans and nature, humans and others, and humans and institutions.

6.3 From Consumer Action to Public Action: Democratic Deliberation, Collective Action, and Institutional Change

If care is to be a sufficient response to the ecological crisis, it cannot remain at the level of private virtues or individual attitudes. The relationships that need to be repaired are not shaped solely by individuals. They are also shaped by the market, infrastructure, production system, law, energy structure, and political system. Thus, ecological responsibility must shift from private consumption to public action. The issue is not just how individuals should consume, but rather how the community should jointly determine production methods, energy usage, land utilization, and shape the relationship between humans and nature in their common life.

This is why Habermas’s theory of the public sphere is useful here. Habermas is not writing specifically about green consumerism, but his critique of consumer culture helps illuminate a similar problem. Green consumerism tends to translate environmental issues—which should be addressed through public deliberation—into matters of consumer preference, taste, and market choice. As Habermas observes, “The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to ‘exchanges about tastes and preferences’ between consumers” (Habermas 1989, 171). Applied to green consumerism, this suggests that environmental politics risks being displaced by market-based choices between green and non-green products.

The appeal of green consumerism lies partly in the fact that it allows consumers to understand their purchasing decisions as a form of civic responsibility. When consumers buy green products, they may feel that they are not merely acting as private buyers, but also participating in environmental politics. Habermas captures this tendency when he writes: “Because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption

decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to ‘address’ its citizens like consumers.”(Habermas 1989, 195)

Applied to green consumerism, this suggests that the role of the citizen is partly displaced by the role of the consumer: environmental responsibility is expressed less through public deliberation and collective decision-making, and more through market choices between green and non-green products.

However, this way of acting as a citizen through consumption effectively reintegrates issues that originally belonged to public politics into the market logic. From this perspective, green consumerism relies on a form of strategic action. Strategic action refers to actors acting within existing rules to achieve their goals. Other people, institutions, and norms are understood as conditions or tools encountered in achieving those goals. As Habermas points out, “Strategic actors encounter normative contexts, as well as other participants, only as social facts.”(Habermas 1989, 524) In green consumerism, consumers face a pre-defined world of existing goods, businesses, institutions, and market conditions. All they can do is choose what to buy and support within these conditions, rather than collectively deciding what kind of energy system, transportation system, or relationship between humanity and nature should be established. The continuous pollution by enterprises, the continued reliance on cars in cities, and the dominance of high-emission industries in the market - all these are regarded as unchangeable realities. As a result, environmental responsibility is understood as “how I should consume”, rather than “how we should jointly change society”.

Furthermore, in this strategic action, people gradually understand nature and others in a subject-object manner. As Habermas stated, “In the objectivating attitude of an observer, they can no longer reach an understanding with others as second persons.” (Habermas 1989, 524) In green consumerism, consumers no longer face others with whom they share a common ecological world and depend on each other, but rather face objects waiting to be chosen, calculated, and managed: goods, resources, eco-labels, and carbon footprints. Nature remains not an other that requires a collective response, but merely an object to be used and managed more responsibly. While green consumerism attempts to make people care about nature, it does not truly transcend the subject-object structure.

In contrast, Habermas’s concept of “communicative action” is not oriented toward individual success, but toward shared understanding. Still, rather for shared understanding, “The basic concept of communicative action explains how social integration can come about through the binding forces of an intersubjectively shared language.” (Habermas 1989, 524) Therefore, environmental issues should not be understood as how consumers can consume

more greenly, but rather as how we should collectively decide, through public discussion, what energy structures, transportation systems, agricultural models, and the relationship between humanity and nature are justifiable.

Thus, environmental action should be more of a collective political practice than an individualized consumption practice. Rather than understanding environmental responsibility as what everyone should buy, it should be understood as “what we should collectively change.” Environmental problems are not the moral failures of isolated individuals, but the result of the combined effects of institutions, modes of production, and social relations. Correspondingly, ecological responsibility should not merely be individual accountability for their own behavior, but rather the collective shaping of new institutions and relationships.

This collective action encompasses at least four levels.

First, there is institutional responsibility. As Henry Shue (1999) and Richard Heede (2014) have pointed out, the entities that truly possess resources, capacity, and emission power are not ordinary consumers, but rather nations, corporations, large capital groups, and high-emission entities. Therefore, they should also bear responsibilities commensurate with their capacity and influence. Ecological responsibility primarily means requiring nations, corporations, and high-emission entities to assume greater responsibility, including promoting energy transition, strengthening environmental regulation, restricting high-emission industries, taking responsibility for historical emissions, and changing the institutional structures that continuously create environmental crises.

Secondly, there is the issue of distributive justice. Ecological transition itself is not neutral. It can affect different groups in different ways. If the costs of transition again fall on low-income groups, workers, or the Global South, then environmental action will perpetuate existing inequalities. As Thomas Wiedmann et al. (2020) have pointed out, high-income groups contribute far more to environmental damage than low-income groups, yet green consumerism often demands equal responsibility from everyone. Within the framework of relational ethics, ecological responsibility must be distributed according to the principles of capacity and contribution: those with more resources and greater contributions to environmental damage should bear more costs, while those most vulnerable to environmental crises and with fewer resources should receive more protection and support.

Third, there is democratic participation. If environmental responsibility concerns not only consumption but also our way of living together, then environmental decisions should not be determined solely by the market and capital, but rather by communities, social

movements, civic organizations, public consultation, and democratic institutions. Genuine public opinion is not formed by the accumulation of preferences of isolated individuals in the market, but rather in an open public sphere. As Jürgen Habermas points out, public opinion arises from “an open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal, social, and substantive boundaries.” (Habermas 1996, 307). Environmental politics should therefore be shaped within communities, social movements, civic organizations, and public discussion, rather than through consumer choices in the market. Market choices are more of an expression of preferences and purchasing power, failing to truly reflect the interests of those lacking purchasing power, future generations, and non-human life. Genuine democratic consultation is also not merely a compromise between different preferences. As Habermas stated, “The political process involves more than compromises based on credible threats.” (Habermas 1996, 338) Democratic politics not only requires coordination among different interests, but also demands that people reach mutually acceptable arguments through public discussion. Therefore, “The consensus brought about through argument must rest on identical reasons able to convince the parties in the same way.” (Habermas 1996, 339) From this perspective, environmental responsibility should not be determined by consumers’ willingness to buy green products. Rather, it should be shaped through public deliberation over which institutions, energy structures, land-use patterns, and human–nature relations can be justified.

Fourth, individual daily practices remain ethically and politically significant, but their significance must be understood relationally rather than as isolated acts of consumer responsibility. Practices such as reducing waste, changing lifestyles, supporting public transportation, participating in community agriculture, resisting highly polluting corporations, or engaging in environmental movements can all matter. A defender of green consumerism could rightly point out that green consumerism need not claim that one individual can save the planet alone; many versions of green consumerism rely precisely on the cumulative effects of many people changing their behaviour. My point is not that individual practices are meaningless. Rather, they are insufficient if they remain detached from collective action, institutional reform, and changes in the relationship between production and consumption. Then the reform of the system, as well as the relationship between production and consumption, is not sufficient. The most important aspect of individual actions lies in whether it can become part of a collective practice to reduce harm, challenge dominance, and repair the damaged relationships between humans and non-human nature, institutions, and future generations.

Therefore, the value of individual action lies not only in reducing personal emissions, but also in whether it contributes to broader collective change. Only when environmental responsibility is no longer framed as “how I should consume,” but as “how we should collectively change,” can the misplacement of responsibility caused by green consumerism be overcome.

VII Objections and Replies

The previous chapters have developed three objections to green consumerism. However, green consumerism can be defended in more moderate forms. It may be argued that green consumerism is not a theory of strict duty, but a theory of virtue. It may also be argued that, in a non-ideal world where capitalism and markets will not disappear soon, green consumption remains necessary and useful. Others may claim that green consumerism is not necessarily anthropocentric, as it can be motivated by respect for nature's intrinsic value. Still others may argue that green consumerism is part of sustainable development, and that any practical environmental theory will have side effects. Finally, one may object that the alternative proposed in this thesis, relational repair, is too abstract and does not clearly tell us what to do.

This chapter considers these objections. I argue that they do not fully undermine the critique developed in this thesis. They show that green consumerism may have a limited and secondary role, but they do not show that it provides an adequate account of ecological responsibility.

7.1 Is Green Consumerism a Virtue Rather Than a Duty?

One possible objection is that green consumerism should not be understood as a theory of strict moral obligation. Perhaps it does not claim that every individual is morally required to buy green products or adopt a green lifestyle. Instead, it may be understood as a theory of green virtue. On this interpretation, green consumption is not something strictly required in every case, but something good, admirable, and praiseworthy. A person who reduces waste, buys less, avoids destructive products, or supports more sustainable production is not necessarily fulfilling a strict duty. Rather, such a person may be expressing ecological awareness, responsibility, restraint, or care.

This objection is important because it weakens part of the causal objection. If green consumerism is understood only as virtue, then it does not need to prove that every individual consumer has a strict duty to consume differently. It only needs to show that green consumption can be morally valuable. I accept this point. Individual practices such as reducing waste, consuming less, supporting local agriculture, or avoiding clearly harmful products can express valuable ecological concern. This thesis does not deny that such actions may be admirable.

However, understanding green consumerism as a virtue creates new and more serious problems. Virtue may be linked to purchasing power. Because green products tend to be

more expensive than ordinary products, if a rich person buys all kinds of green products in life, can it mean that this person is morally good? Therefore, green consumption may become a way to demonstrate moral status. In this scenario, green products are like luxury goods, and buying them does not by itself show that one is more virtuous or ecologically responsible.(Veblen 1899). A person who can afford expensive ecological products can appear virtuous, responsible, and enlightened. By contrast, people with fewer resources may appear less responsible, even though they often contribute far less to ecological destruction.

For this reason, the virtue-based defense of green consumerism weakens the charge that green consumerism imposes strict duties on all consumers, but it does not solve the deeper problem. Even as a virtue, green consumption can still be shaped by purchasing power and become a way of displaying moral status.

7.2 Is Green Consumerism Necessary in a Non-Ideal World?

A second possible objection is that green consumerism may still be necessary in a non-ideal world. Capitalism, globalization, and market economies are not going to disappear soon. Most people will continue to live as consumers. They will continue to buy food, clothing, transport, technology, and energy. If this is the world we are in, then the question of how to behave as consumers cannot simply be avoided. Even if green consumerism is imperfect, it may still be better than doing nothing.

This objection is quite reasonable. However, the problem begins when green consumption is treated as the primary form of ecological responsibility. In that case, green consumerism risks becoming a substitute for politics. People may come to believe that they have fulfilled their environmental responsibility by buying the right products. They may feel morally satisfied and therefore pay less attention to corporations, states, energy systems, and institutions.

As Marcuse argues, modern capitalism is able to absorb criticism and translate it into consumption (Marcuse 2013). Dissatisfaction with the system may not lead to political resistance, but to new consumer demands. In the context of green consumerism, ecological anxiety may be redirected into the desire to buy green products. After buying green products, consumers may feel as if they have done the right thing, but in fact, the deeper production structure remains basically the same.

Therefore, my point is not that green consumerism has no effect. Rather, the problem is that it shifts attention toward individual consumers and away from production, infrastructure, regulation, and political power.

7.3 Can Green Consumerism Recognize the Intrinsic Value of Nature?

A third possible objection is that green consumerism need not be anthropocentric. It may be defended by appealing not only to human welfare, but also to the intrinsic value of nature. On this view, consumers should avoid destructive products not merely because environmental destruction harms humans, but because forests, rivers, animals, ecosystems, and other forms of life have value in themselves.

This objection is also important. It would be too absolute to claim that every form of green consumerism denies the intrinsic value of nature. Some consumers may indeed buy green products because of nature itself. I accept this possibility. Green consumerism can sometimes indeed be driven by genuine ecological concerns. It is not always purely anthropocentric.

However, the problem remains that green consumerism tends to translate this concern into consumer choice. Even when nature is regarded as intrinsically valuable, the practical response is still framed in terms of buying or not buying certain products. The value of nature is then expressed through labels, certifications, product categories, and market preferences; in other words, nature appears through the commodity form. But the value of nature and the value of commodities are not the same. As discussed in Section 4.2, whether a product counts as green is partly shaped by market discourse. Even if a product is genuinely greener at the point of consumption, the process through which it is produced may not itself be green.

Therefore, even when green consumerism recognizes the value of nature, it often does so by translating ecological concern into the language of individual choice and market action.

7.4 Sustainable Development for Whom?

A fourth possible objection is that green consumerism can be understood as part of sustainable development. Green consumption may be seen as a practical way to move society toward sustainability. Although green consumerism may be imperfect, it can still be said to contribute to sustainable development.

This objection is also important. However, the problem is that we must ask: whose sustainability is being protected? What kind of sustainable development is being promoted? Who decides what counts as sustainable? Who benefits from green markets? And who remains invisible in this process?

First, the costs of green products are not borne only by a small group of wealthy consumers. They are also borne by ordinary consumers, since green costs are often shifted

from corporations to consumers through higher prices. But cost shifting does not occur only at the point of purchase; it also occurs during production. As the discussion of Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in Section 4.3 showed, the apparent greenness of a product may hide the fact that ecological and social costs have been pushed onto poorly paid workers, small suppliers, Indigenous communities, or less powerful regions. A product may look sustainable at the point of purchase. But if it depends on exploitative labor, extractive mining, land dispossession, or unequal global supply chains, then its sustainability is only superficial. The same problem appears when wealthy countries relocate pollution to poorer countries. The wealthy country may then present its own environment as cleaner or more sustainable, while the receiving country gains only short-term economic benefits and is left with long-term ecological damage. This is not genuine environmental sustainability, but the displacement of environmental costs. Another example is that many Indigenous and subsistence ways of life may already be ecologically sustainable, but they are not always recognized by the market as green. By contrast, a highly industrialized product may be recognized as green as long as it carries the right label.

Dauvergne and Lister's critique of eco-business makes a similar point. For corporations engaged in eco-business, sustainability often aims to sustain big business itself, rather than the living conditions of people and the planet (Dauvergne and Lister 2013). In other words, sustainability may become a way to protect existing systems of production and consumption rather than transform them. A product may become more efficient, while total production and consumption continue to grow. In this case, sustainability is compatible with expansion, profit, and ongoing ecological pressures.

Therefore, sustainable development is a broad concept, and this thesis specifically concerns environmental sustainability. Green consumerism may appear to support environmental sustainability, but in practice, it often allows corporations to hide and shift environmental problems across production and consumption processes rather than resolve them.

7.5 Is Relational Repair Too Abstract?

A final possible objection concerns the alternative proposed in this thesis. If green consumerism is not adequate, and if ecological responsibility should instead be understood as relational repair, then what does this mean in practice? Is relational repair too abstract? Does it provide any concrete guidance?

This objection is reasonable. Relational repair is indeed more abstract than green consumerism, and it may seem less easy to implement. However, relational repair is not meant to be a single policy program. It is a normative framework for evaluating environmental responsibility. It asks whether a practice or policy actually repairs damaged relationships, or whether it simply reproduces the same problems in a greener form. Does this action make visible the relationships hidden by market logic? Does it reconnect people with land, labor, food, energy, and ecosystems? Does it include affected communities in environmental decision-making?

Therefore, relational repair is not a substitute for specific policies. Rather, it is a way to judge whether policies and practices are ecologically and morally adequate. It shifts attention from isolated consumers to the relationships that make ecological harm possible. It also asks whether environmental action truly transforms these relationships, and whether it helps repair the relationships between humans and nature, between social groups, between present and future generations, and between people and institutions.

VIII Conclusion

This thesis argues that green consumerism creates a systemic misallocation of environmental responsibility. Green consumerism primarily understands the ecological crisis as a matter of individual consumption choices, thus overestimating the importance of individual consumption behavior, obscuring the responsibilities of the state, corporations, and other powerful entities, and failing to address the institutional structures that persistently contribute to the ecological crisis. Therefore, the problem with green consumerism is not merely its failure to fairly distribute responsibility. At a deeper level, it is built upon a specific view of the relationship between humanity and nature. Green consumerism presupposes an independent, autonomous, and rational consumer subject who influences the environment through personal choices.

For this reason, the real problem with green consumerism is not that it demands excessive concern for the environment, but that it demands concern for the environment in the wrong way. It forces people to respond to ecological crises primarily as consumers, rather than as co-habitants, stakeholders in relationships, citizens, or institutional participants. As a result, environmental responsibility is reduced to a privatized, consumerist moral choice. In contrast, institutions, corporations, and power structures that contribute most to environmental damage become less visible as responsible agents.

This thesis therefore argues that ecological responsibility should be understood as a practice of relational repair. The task of environmental responsibility is not merely more responsible consumption, but rather the re-establishment of severed, obscured, and commodified relationships between humanity and nature, humanity and future generations, and humanity and institutions. This shift requires not only changes in individual habits but also a reorganization of our shared ways of living, and the transformation of social structures that continuously create ecological crises through democratic participation, collective action, and institutional change. In this sense, individual action remains important.

Therefore, the real question is no longer “What should I buy?” but “How should we live together?” Only when we begin to raise this broader question can environmental responsibility truly transcend the misplacement of responsibility caused by green consumerism and become a more just, democratic, and adequate response to ecological crisis.

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Summary / Abstract

This thesis argues that there are three main ways in which responsibilities are misallocated in the environmental responsibility model of green consumerism. First, at the causal level, green consumerism overemphasizes the importance of individual consumption while underestimating the role of industrial production, energy systems, firms, and institutions in the ecological crisis. Secondly, at the political level, it individualizes and marketizes responsibilities, so that some enterprises, rich individuals, or collectives can obtain green legitimacy. If responsibility is distributed equally among all consumers, it will be unfair to many ordinary people who have no money or resources; if it is not equalized, the rich can take this opportunity to gain a moral advantage. However, while buying green, they still emit and consume more resources. Third, at the ontological level, green consumerism tends to reproduce a subject–object relation between humans and nature, and a human-centered model of domination. This thesis draws on some moral responsibility theories, Marx, Marcuse, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and care ethics to argue that ecological responsibility should not be centered on individual consumption choices. Instead, ecological responsibility should be understood as relational repair: repairing damaged relationships between humans and nature, between humans, and between current and future generations.

Annotation

This thesis argues that green consumerism emphasizes individual consumer responsibility and can easily ignore collective responsibility. It analyzes and critiques green consumerism at three levels: causal, political, and ontological. It is argued that ecological responsibility should be understood as a form of relational repair. This includes repairing damaged relationships between humans and nature, among human beings, and between contemporary and future generations.

Keywords:

Green consumerism; Environmental responsibility; Ecological responsibility; Ecofeminism; Relational repair

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