Waste colonialism in the Fast Fashion Industry:
An Exploration of Responsibility in an Irresponsible and Unsustainable World

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"If we judge our actions innocent and we win, we win nothing, history goes on as before, but if we lose, we lose everything [...]. Suppose that, inversely, we choose to consider ourselves responsible: if we lose, we lose nothing, but if we win, we win everything." – Michel Serres, The Natural Contract, 1995, p. 5.

Abstract

This thesis examines waste colonialism in the fast fashion industry, focusing on the Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana. It argues that the Global North's export of low-quality textile waste to the Global South is not accidental, but a continuation of colonial power structures that externalise harm and structurally evade responsibility. By tracing how Western philosophical, economic and cultural frameworks define moral worth and recognition, this thesis shows how these systems legitimise environmental and humanitarian injustice. Through analysis of corporate social responsibility (CSR), consumer complicity and the marginalisation of non-Western frameworks, it critiques capitalism's instrumental logic and modern Western dualist structures that underlie systems of disposability and exclusion. However, beyond critique, this thesis turns to Kantamanto as a place of resistance, where practices of repair and reuse embody a relational responsibility that challenges dominant narratives of disposability. Ultimately, this thesis calls for a rethinking of responsibility that moves beyond individualism and profit, but is sustained by reciprocity, relation and collective accountability.

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Introduction

The Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana, is one of the largest hubs for second-hand clothing resale in the world. Each week, the Global North exports approximately 15 million garments to the market, where they are sorted, repaired, altered and resold to people who are looking to buy unique clothes at a low price. This immense system depends on the labour and skills of over 30.000 people, for whom the market provides employment by giving new value to clothes that others have thrown out. These clothes are often not immediately ready for resale but require cleaning, redyeing or other forms of repair to restore the items' value and make them appealing to customers again. As such, on top of being vital to Ghana's economy, Kantamanto is widely celebrated for being a space where creativity, resourcefulness and circularity are part of everyday life. Here, the value of clothes is not determined by how new or trendy they are, but by the care and effort that are invested into making sure each garment gains a new life (Franklin-Wallis, 2023).

In recent years, however, the conditions that supported these practices have become disrupted, as the trade in second-hand clothing between the Global North and South has increasingly fallen prey to exploitation by Western countries, which have started using it as a waste management solution for their unwanted textiles, often under the guise of sustainability or charity. Such behaviour disrupts the system's mutually beneficial nature and shifts the burden of textile waste solely to Ghanaians, rather than the countries that export it. The rise of fast fashion plays a crucial role in this, as it has led to a drastic decline in the quality of the clothing sent to Ghana, while quantities only keep increasing. Whereas previously, Ghanaian resellers referred to the garments they received as *Obroni w'awu* – 'dead white man's clothes' – because they could not believe that pieces of such high quality would be discarded unless their owner had died (Franklin-Wallis, 2023), today, about 40% of the 15 million garments that arrive at Kantamanto each week are immediately deemed unfit for resale (Logan, 2023).

Because recycling textiles is difficult and costly, and little external support is offered to enable it at the necessary scale, clothes that cannot be resold are instantly sent to landfill or dumped illegally. These discarded garments often end up in waterways, on beaches or in the living spaces of vulnerable communities, causing serious environmental and public health issues: discarded clothes block sewers, which leads to flooding, heavy mosquito breeding and the rapid spread of diseases (Harris, 2022). Even when waste is officially collected and disposed of via formal routes, Ghana's waste management system cannot keep up. The Kpone landfill, which was designed to take up to forty years to fill, ended up reaching full capacity within just three years (Renwick, 2023). As a result, more Ghanaian land must be cleared to accommodate the waste, which further displaces marginalised communities and pollutes ecosystems. What started as a reuse system has thus turned into an unmanageable waste crisis. Ghanaian resellers are forced to invest in bales of fast fashion that they cannot profit from, and the local population is left to deal with the detrimental ecological and humanitarian damages that come along with the import of, what is essentially, the Global North's trash (Franklin-Wallis, 2023).

This situation is not the accidental result of too many clothes ending up in the wrong place, or of recycling systems failing to keep up. Rather, it is a structural form of *waste colonialism*: the continuous displacement of toxic, low-value or unwanted materials from areas of privilege and wealth to areas with lower economic status and influence (Huang, 2023). Textile waste does not simply arrive in Accra because it has a second-hand clothing market; it follows established routes of power that are shaped by colonial hierarchies that continue to dictate who must live with the

consequences of overproduction and overconsumption, and who is able to avoid them. The fact that waste is structurally exported to places like Ghana, Indonesia and Chile's Atacama Desert – while Western Europe and North America remain largely unaffected – reflects deeper structures of valuation that divide the world into environments and lives worth safeguarding, and those that are considered expendable and sacrificial (Cawood, 2023). Waste colonialism reproduces these colonial hierarchies: land is accessed through imbalanced power dynamics without clear consent from the tenant, and is used to serve the interests of the polluter, instead of being fair to both parties (Liboiron, 2018).[1] This shows that despite its formal independence, Ghana remains in an extractive structure of colonialism, the violence of which is reasserted each day that Western waste occupies Ghanaian land (Liboiron, 2021, p. 6).

At the core of this imbalance lie long-standing philosophical, economic and cultural frameworks that have historically defined what counts as harm, who is held accountable, and which lives are deemed worth protecting. This thesis argues that Enlightenment notions of rationality and personhood, capitalist values of efficiency and growth, and Euro-modern ideas of individual responsibility have helped normalise a global order in which communities like Accra's are left to manage the consequences of Western overconsumption. These frameworks, which shape decision-making in the Global North, are neither neutral nor passive. They do not simply reflect reality; they help structure it in ways that make injustices easy to ignore. In doing so, they create moral blind spots: places where suffering is either unseen or systematically deprioritised, allowing Western convenience and affluence to continue while environmental harm and health risks are displaced to the margins, where survival becomes increasingly difficult (Lerner, 2010, p. 3). Confronting waste colonialism, then, involves more than criticising the fast fashion industry or global trade systems. It requires a deeper critical analysis and philosophical re-evaluation of the underlying ideas and values that legitimise these systems and sustain global inequality.

Therefore, this thesis asks: How do dominant Western philosophical, economic, and consumer frameworks contribute to the conditions under which waste colonialism becomes possible – particularly in how harm is distributed, responsibility is selectively denied, and marginalised lives are rendered disposable? And what would it take to reconstruct the material, social and ontological conditions that make relational, inclusive responsibility viable again in the face of these imposed exclusionary and extractive systems?

This inquiry is grounded in a deeper question: What creates responsibility in the first place, and what has made it so easy to selectively refuse? If Western extractive and individualistic practices exclude some people and environments from their circle of concern, then responsibility needs to be rethought from the ground up. This is where the practical issue of waste colonialism extends into the mostly theoretical realm of philosophy. As scholars like Michel Serres and Max Liboiron argue, the ecological and humanitarian crises of our time are inseparable from long-standing histories of ontological and epistemic exclusion of both marginalised communities and the natural world itself. Therefore, any real response to waste colonialism must involve a reconstruction of how we think, relate and value in a world shaped by separation and denial.

The Kantamanto Market remains central throughout this thesis, serving both as a location where waste colonialism takes place and as a site of potential. It is both a place where unwanted textiles

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[1] When I say 'land', I mean it in the broad sense of the word, including water, air and earth.

arrive and a space where alternative ways of relating persist. At Kantamanto, responsibility is *lived* as relation. Care is not owed to someone or something because they meet a moral standard, but because it emerges from relationality itself. The ongoing practices of repair, reuse and conservation serve as acts of resistance against the disposability promoted by Western cultures. These practices should not be romanticised, appropriated or thoughtlessly translated into Western systems, but recognised as enduring expressions of a way of living that insists on practicing care despite systemic challenges, and that invites us to rethink what responsibility could mean when understood from a viewpoint of relation rather than disconnection.

To explore these questions, this thesis is organised into four chapters, which each address a different dimension of waste colonialism and the conditions that make responsibility both necessary and difficult today.

Chapter 1 begins with the question of recognition. Drawing on Enlightenment thinkers like Descartes, Kant and Hegel, it traces how dominant notions of rationality and personhood created lasting hierarchies that determine which lives and environments are seen as worth protecting. Situating this question historically helps explain why urgent cases of waste colonialism today often fail to provoke the outrage they would if they occurred in wealthier regions. The harm is not less severe – it is registered differently. Referencing the work of Da Silva (2007) and Asma (1995), the chapter argues that waste colonialism is not only about the unequal distribution of waste, but also about the structures of thought that sustain unequal moral visibility, making the mistreatment of certain populations appear natural. Finally, it illustrates how these exclusionary frameworks remain active in contemporary global trade and environmental governance, where the question of who receives and who avoids harm still follows the lines of historical exclusion.

Chapter 2 turns to the economic dimensions of waste colonialism in fast fashion and examines how these influence the industry's approach to responsibility. By situating the fast fashion industry within the broader logic of modern capitalism, it shows how fast fashion has come to reflect and reinforce capitalism's drive for speed, growth and profit. Rather than viewing fast fashion's harms as incidental, Part I considers whether they are structurally embedded in capitalism itself through the ideas of Smith (2007), Wilkinson (1973), Serres (2011) and Harvey (2003). From this perspective, fast fashion's environmental and social harms cannot be fully addressed without questioning the self-interested principles that underlie them. Part II explores the limitations of corporate social responsibility (CSR), using real-world examples to illustrate how CSR often results in superficial responses that allow companies to appear responsible without making actual changes. Using literature by Eabrasu (2012) and Hahn et al. (2015), the chapter then considers whether moving from a focus on short-term benefits to a broader, long-term approach to responsibility could lead to structural changes.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the consumer. Using Benjamin's (1969) concepts of *phantasmagoria* and *aura*, it explores how the fast fashion industry intentionally obscures the histories and networks of labour and harm garments exist in to create a sense of distance between consumption and its consequences, which helps the industry maintain cycles of disposal and overconsumption. Following this, it turns to what this separation means, using Tuck and Yang's (2012) idea of 'settler moves to innocence' to examine how consumers often think they are being responsible when they donate or buy 'conscious' products, even though in reality, they often still end up perpetuating the problem. Ultimately, the chapter asks how consumers can contribute to change when they are both shaped by and complicit in systems of harm, and what it means to reclaim responsibility by restoring the

relations the fast fashion industry has obscured, so action can emerge from within, rather than outside, those relations.

Chapter 4 focuses on repair as both a concept and a lived practice. Building on the work of Watts (2013) and Ikuenobe (2014), it examines what has been displaced because of colonial practices that forced Indigenous and traditional cultures into extractive and disconnected ways of life, and it questions what is necessary to restore the social, material and ontological conditions for grounding responsibility in reciprocity, inclusion and relationality. The chapter argues that repair demands a rethinking of the foundational assumptions of separation and disposability that structure the fast fashion industry's global system. It concludes by returning to Kantamanto – not as a place that seeks inclusion in dominant systems, but as one that already enacts values of care, interdependence and conservation. Supporting such practices requires not only recognition but also the direct challenging of the colonial and capitalist structures that sustain waste colonialism. In this context, repair is not simply a response to harm but a commitment to re-grounding responsibility in relation.

By examining the interconnected dynamics of harm, detachment and repair, this thesis aims to not only critique the philosophical, economic and cultural structures that enable and sustain waste colonialism, but to also contribute to the work of reimagining how we live *with* and *through* waste, and how inclusionary and relational responsibility might be made possible against the norms of disposability, exclusion and extraction that have long made it incoherent.

Chapter 1
The Philosophical Foundations of Waste Colonialism: Recognition, Exclusion and the Modern Subject

1.1 Waste, Visibility, and the Question of Recognition

On the 2nd of February, 1968, seven thousand sanitation workers gathered in New York's City Hall Park. After city officials announced that their demands for improved working conditions and wages would not be met, they did something they were not allowed to do: they went on strike. The following day, no garbage was collected. Within two days, mountains of trash of several metres tall began piling up in the streets. A vile stench spread through the air, and even the wealthiest and most 'distinguished' neighbourhoods were overrun by rats. The situation deteriorated quickly. The mayor declared a state of emergency for the first time in 37 years, and by the ninth day of the strike, over 100.000 tonnes of garbage had accumulated in the streets. Eventually, the city conceded to the workers' demands and acknowledged what had become undeniably clear: without proper waste management, a city cannot survive (Marton, 2015; Bregman & Frederik, 2018).

This historical example illustrates that effective waste management is not a luxury but a foundational requirement for public health, political order and the stability, safety and functioning of modern life. When waste becomes visible, it reveals the fragility of the systems meant to contain it. Its visibility disrupts the presumed boundary between order and disorder, and centre and periphery: suddenly, what should be moved elsewhere intrudes on everyday life and demands a response. In light of the textile dumping that currently takes place in Ghana, the contrast in responses becomes impossible to ignore. If the accumulation of 100.000 tonnes of waste in New York destabilised a global city in just over a week and triggered an immediate state of emergency, why does the dumping of 100.000 tonnes of Western textile waste in Ghana every day not provoke a similar sense of crisis, widespread concern or political urgency – or even register as a global threat? (Choat, 2023) What does this silence reveal about whose experiences of disruption are seen as intolerable, and whose can be ignored without consequence?

This disparity cannot be explained solely by differences in economic resources or the efficiency of waste management systems – as these differences are themselves often products of systemic inequalities. Rather, at the heart of this asymmetry lies a question of *recognition*: which lives and environments are seen as worth protecting, and which are not. When Ghanaian communities are forced to accept amounts of waste that would trigger a public health emergency in the Global North, the key difference is not infrastructure, but whose harm is allowed to matter. Harm is thus not just unequally distributed; it is unequally recognised. There is, then, a deeply embedded hierarchy in how suffering is recognised: some people's well-being automatically triggers concern, while others' suffering is structurally ignored and normalised. This unequal response is perpetuated by longstanding ideas that continue to shape how we see and value different people. These ideas, which have been formed and entrenched over centuries, still influence who is considered fully capable of reason, agency and moral worth, and who is not, and therefore continue to shape how human life is perceived and valued today.

To understand how the establishment of this disparity became possible and why it continues to influence the distribution of waste today, it is important to turn to the conceptual frameworks that have produced the modern world's hierarchy of value, which determines who is granted visibility and protection, and who is structurally marginalised. One of the most influential of these frameworks arose during the European Enlightenment, when philosophers and life scientists set out to define the modern subject, which is most often referred to as 'modern man'. Their aim was emancipatory: to push back against the norms and values that had previously been dominant, such as the important role religion, monarchy, myths and institutions played in guiding the beliefs and behaviours of the masses, and to replace this guardianship with the use of autonomous reason. This goal is captured in Immanuel Kant's famous call to end "self-incurred immaturity" by daring to think for oneself (Kant, 2013, p. 54). During this period, the status of reason evolved greatly in a short period of time, and autonomous reason became the central quality of the modern subject, displacing external authority with a universal idea of rational agency (Da Silva, 2007, p. 39).

However, as scholars like Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) and Stephen Asma (1995) contend, in practice, this Enlightenment ideal of autonomy is neither truly universal nor neutral, because this standard emerged within the specific historical and geographical context of late-seventeenth-century Western Europe, which was closely linked to colonial expansion and racial classification. Consequently, Da Silva argues that a strong, conceptual link was created between Euro-whiteness and rationality on the one hand, and irrationality and 'otherness' (or: non-Euro-whiteness) on the other hand, leading to the idea that self-governance and moral responsibility were mainly traits of the 'modern' Euro-white subject, while people outside Western Europe were increasingly viewed as dependent and irrational (Da Silva 2007, pp. 21–22). The growing life sciences of this period strengthened this connection by interpreting physical characteristics like skin colour, cranial measurements and facial structure as outward indicators of a person's inner capabilities, thereby grounding assumptions about differences in cognitive and cultural development in biology (Asma, 1995, pp. 22–23).

In this way, Enlightenment rationality did not simply exclude certain groups from rational autonomy; it naturalised this exclusion. Consequently, gradually, the marginalisation and exclusion of non-European populations was no longer seen as the result of a social construct, but as an expression of inevitable, inherent difference. In this new order, exclusion no longer required explicit justification. Thus, although the Enlightenment period certainly did not invent inequality or exclusion, it did supply it with a powerful gatekeeping mechanism: only those who are recognised as rational, autonomous subjects are granted full rights and protections (Da Silva, 2007, pp. 100–101; Op De Beek, 2025, p. 18).

The aim of this chapter is not to present a complete history of exclusion, nor to hold individual Enlightenment philosophers directly accountable for colonial violence. Rather, it aims to show how the historical construction of specific, Eurocentric ideas about reason, autonomy and moral worth have laid the groundwork for ongoing global asymmetries in whose suffering is considered visible and urgent, and whose is normalised, accepted and ignored. To demonstrate this, this chapter reconstructs three key philosophical developments: Descartes' separation of mind and matter, Kant's centring of rational autonomy as the criterion for full recognition, and Hegel's connection of interior rationality and exterior appearance – to show how these ideas gradually established a conceptual framework in which exclusion no longer required explicit justification and instead appeared natural.

These three thinkers are presented in this order because their contributions build on each other. Descartes lays the groundwork by separating mind from body, and defining the self through disembodied rationality. Kant elevates this rationality to the moral realm by making rational autonomy the basis for dignity and moral worth – but only for those recognised as capable of it. And Hegel adds a further layer by linking rational autonomy to external characteristics, which implies that one's capacity for reason can be inferred through physical or cultural qualities. In this context, the cumulative outcome, rather than individual intentions of these philosophies is central, as together, these developments create a framework in which recognition and protection are granted selectively, based on racialised and exclusionary ideals of rational personhood. This reasoning helps explain how entire populations – such as those affected by Western textile dumping in Ghana – can be subjected to such large amounts of waste without this leading to widespread outrage. Their harm has become normalised, accepted – and over time – invisible. This chapter therefore shows that the lack of response to Ghana's waste colonialism is not an exception or isolated issue, but the manifestation of a longstanding pattern: the systemic denial of recognition and care for the harm experienced by those pushed to the margins.

1.2 Constructing the Modern Subject: From Rational Essence to Racial Boundary

1.2.1 Cartesian Dualism: Mind, Body and Recognition

At the centre of the Enlightenment's reimagining of what it means to be human lies an important shift: the belief that abstract, autonomous reason is the defining quality that gives a person their identity and worth. René Descartes stands at the forefront of this transformation toward the 'thinking subject'. By splitting the human into two distinct substances, namely mind (*res cogitans*) and body (*res extensa*), Descartes redefined the self as something immaterial, internal and rational that is unaffected by external circumstances. The mind, according to Descartes, is an autonomous substance that "determines but is not itself determined" by anything external, whereas the body and the material world are subject to outer forces and change, making them less dependable (Asma, 1995, pp. 68–69; Prins, 2022, p. 12).[2]

This idea had important consequences for Enlightenment thought. By separating mind from matter, Descartes allowed Enlightenment thinkers to locate personal identity in the mind alone, which is immaterial, autonomous and unaffected by the body. This provided a foundation for the ideal of the rational subject, whose value lies in the capacity to think independently and act according to reason. Consequently, personhood could now be defined by the capacity for rational thought rather than inherited roles or social status, making it something that universally applies to all human beings. On the surface, this paves the way for equality. If rationality is located in the mind, and the immaterial mind is unaffected by the physical body and contingent outer conditions, then all humans – no matter their sex, background or skin colour – should be equally capable of reason and self-determination. French philosopher François Poullain de La Barre was an important proponent of this theory, and he argued as early as 1671 that women and men are intellectually equal because the mind is unaffected by sex, making Cartesian dualism a theory that supports a progressive and inclusive view of humanity (Poullain, 2002, p. 82).

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[2] 'Mind' or soul.

However, Denise Ferreira da Silva critiques this position. She argues that such progressive readings of Descartes' dualism that attempt to expand the circle of inclusion by asserting that all humans are equally capable of reason, do not challenge the deeper issue at hand: in the (post-)Enlightenment order, inclusion does not depend on rationality alone, but on whether one's rationality is *recognised* – and recognition is selective (Da Silva, 2007, p. 29). Even if all humans are rational in principle, like Poullain contends, not everyone is acknowledged or treated as such in practice. Cartesian rationalism therefore installs a filter: populations that are already associated with rationality – which are mostly white, Western European men – quickly and easily receive acknowledgement as being rational. In contrast, those that are culturally linked to embodiment – such as racialised, feminised or colonised subjects – are structurally perceived as being closer to *res extensa*, regardless of their actual intellectual capabilities. Thus, while rationality may be universal in theory, it is unevenly granted in practice. Consequently, Da Silva argues, as long as moral agency depends on perceived rationality, the possibility for exclusion remains structurally intact (Da Silva, 2007, pp. 4–5).

This selectivity is of great importance to this chapter's argument. If only those recognised as rational are considered autonomous, then protection from harm is not automatically extended to all with reason, but filtered through a biased lens. Although Descartes himself explicitly opposed the use of his theory for such divisive ends – as becomes clear from his refusal to claim that the Indigenous Huron tribe lacked thought when asked why they did not adhere to the Christian God, whom he believed to be the bestower of thought (Descartes, 1964, AT VIII.124) – Da Silva argues that his substance dualism still laid the conceptual groundwork for the exclusion of non-Euro-white populations from full humanity (Da Silva, 2007, p. 44). Cartesian dualism provides a subtle but impactful mechanism for exclusion: it does not openly deny the rationality of racialised others, but it constructs a model in which rationality must be *recognised*, and can be selectively withheld. In this way, European powers could claim universal reason while denying its recognition to the populations they dominated. The division of res cogitans and res extensa thus helped naturalise a hierarchy in which Europe portrayed itself as the disembodied intellectual agent, while the colonised world became the material realm to be controlled and mastered.

1.2.2 Kantian Ethics and the Limits of Inclusion

Whereas Descartes defines subjecthood through the capacity for thought, Kant takes this a step further by making reason the basis of both personhood and morality. From his perspective, what distinguishes human beings from animals is not just the ability to think, but the ability to autonomously use reason to determine and follow universal moral laws, based on a sense of duty rather than inclination, impulse or external influence (Perov, 2023, pp. 3–4). This shift marks an important development in the Enlightenment's model of the subject, as Kant's concept of *rational autonomy* became the new basis of moral worth and agency. A subject who self-legislates by following these universal, rational principles is an agent who possesses a dignity or "absolute inner worth by which he exacts respect for himself from all other rational beings in the world," (Kant, 1996, pp. 434–435).

This statement, however, captures both the core and exclusionary potential of Kant's moral philosophy: while respect is unconditional in theory, as it is owed to all rational beings who must be treated as ends in themselves rather than means to an end, in practice, it is conditional on being

recognised as capable of independent moral reasoning. If someone is not seen as exercising this capacity, they are not considered a person in the full Kantian sense, and therefore not granted the full moral respect that Kant's philosophy promises. This is where a problem arises. Because recognition is not neutral, a contradiction arises: while Kant publicly celebrates the ideal of thinking independently and breaking free from tutelage and 'immaturity', his anthropological and geographical writings – in which he repeatedly describes non-European peoples as being led more by emotion and inclination than by reason, and more by tradition than by principle, making them less capable of rational autonomy – simultaneously suggest that some groups are not ready, or even able, to achieve this independence.

In fact, his writings imply that these groups are not simply immature, but *unable* to mature on their own, meaning they must be guided, disciplined or educated before they can ever become rationally autonomous (Da Silva, 2007, p. 119). In practice, this means that they should think for themselves – but not yet – as they must first be guided by the rational, Euro-white subject. By taking on this position, Kant does not simply contradict himself; he structurally embeds a form of restraint into his theory that reframes the very dependency he claims to oppose as something necessary and acceptable in selective contexts. Consequently, he effectively reserves the authority to determine who may govern themselves, and when, to a selective group of people, while simultaneously turning respect and dignity into qualities that must be confirmed and recognised by those who already possess them, rather than belonging to all rational humans.

Here, it becomes clear that Kant's philosophy both extends and intensifies the problem already present in Descartes' philosophy. Cartesian dualism creates a hierarchy by associating reason with disembodiment and positioning embodied and racialised subjects as closer to nature. Kant reconfigures this framework into a moral hierarchy: the question is no longer just whether someone can think, but whether they can think in the 'right' way, and whether this is acknowledged by the 'right' people. However, in a context where full personhood and moral worth depend on being recognised as rationally autonomous, and recognition is filtered through a Eurocentric lens, some people never qualify. The result is a moral hierarchy that positions some as fully human and others as perpetually in waiting. As such, the risk of the selectivity of recognition that Da Silva points out in Descartes becomes even more pronounced in Kant's system: the authority to grant autonomy is reserved only for those already recognised as rational, which transforms self-legislation into a privilege distributed by the dominant group. Consequently, any group that is not perceived as autonomous is systematically excluded from full personhood and respect (Da Silva, 2007, pp. 5, 59).

This selective recognition is very important to understanding how contemporary forms of harm such as waste colonialism can continue without leading to widespread concern and outrage today: it enables a structural asymmetry. When communities are not recognised as fully rationally autonomous moral agents, their exposure to harm is not seen as a violation of dignity or respect, but as an unfortunate consequence of uneven development. They can be treated as means – recipients of environmental degradation rather than subjects worthy of protection from it – without this violating Kant's moral system, because these groups are viewed as 'not having qualified for full moral standing yet'. Thus, Kant's moral system does not need to explicitly promote exclusion to produce it. It only needs to define the conditions of moral obligation narrowly enough that certain populations – particularly colonised and racialised ones – do not meet them, allowing the system to effectively sideline them under the guise of universality. In doing so, domination can be recast as moral

responsibility, intervention as guidance, and inequality as progress. Kant's philosophy thus leaves a double legacy: on the one hand, it offers a compelling vision of moral worth and respect based on internal capacities rather than external qualities; on the other hand, it establishes a gatekeeping mechanism that makes dignity conditional on recognition, which is selective. The colonial logic of 'not yet' – not yet autonomous, not yet modern – that is expressed by Kant continues to shape whose suffering leads to action, and whose does not.

1.2.3 Hegel and the Exteriorisation of Difference

While Descartes grounds subjectivity in disembodied reason and Kant defines it through the capacity for rational autonomy, both ultimately treat subjectivity as something that can exist independently of the material world. Reason, in their frameworks, remains internal, abstract and immaterial, which means that personhood cannot be visibly verified, making it easier for exclusion to appear as a natural outcome than an active decision. Entire populations could thus be denied recognition and protection by failing to meet the unspoken, Eurocentric standards of personhood.

However, as Enlightenment thought progressed, the assumptions that the mind is entirely separate from the body and that humans are rationally autonomous by nature were increasingly challenged. The rise of scientific determinism – particularly Newtonian physics and the law of cause and effect – introduced a serious problem: if everything in the universe – including human thought and behaviour – is subject to the deterministic laws of nature, how can modern man remain self-governing and autonomous? This problem complicates the idea of free will and undermines the foundation of autonomous rationality that Kant and Descartes placed at the centre of their philosophies.

To move beyond these tensions, what was needed was not just a defence of freedom, but a framework in which rationality could be reconnected to the world: a theory that reconciles the existence of causality with autonomy. This is where Hegel's theory becomes important. Without directly responding to Kant or Descartes, Hegel reconfigures their conceptions of the subject entirely. Rather than viewing the subject as a self-contained, isolated entity, he presents it as something that *becomes* and *evolves* through its interactions with the world. In his model, subjectivity is no longer disembodied or immaterial, but develops through concrete engagement with real, material circumstances (Da Silva, 2007, pp. 48, 101).

To support this view, Hegel revises Kant's distinction between the noumenal realm, which contains the *real* essences of things, and the phenomenal realm, which represents the world as we experience it (Kant, 2001, pp. 51, 53–54). While Kant maintains that the noumenal essence of things is ultimately inaccessible to us, Hegel argues that if we are to avoid being trapped in appearances – and thus in determinism – essence must become knowable in some way. Hegel, however, does not argue that essence is immediately visible. Instead, he argues that as we experience, contemplate and interpret reality, the 'ungraspable' essences of things gradually reveal themselves to us in our experiences (Asma, 1995, p. 22). This process takes place within Spirit, or *Geist*, which is the universal force through which reason comes to know and understand itself as it unfolds dialectically through contradiction and resolution across time and history. In this framework, reason does not exist separately from the world, but emerges from within it. The rational subject is shaped by material conditions and shapes them in return in a co-constitutive process (Da Silva, 2007, pp. 47–48; Prins, 2022, p. 15).

While this process may sound complicated, its consequences are concrete and crucial. If subjectivity develops through reason's interactions with the world, then the boundary between interior and exterior begins to dissolve. This means that there is no longer a strict divide between what something *is* and how it *appears*, because the internal becomes expressed in the external over time. Consequently, the inner qualities of a subject, such as reason, moral capacity and agency, are no longer separate from external qualities, but co-constitutive with them, as both are unified by the universal reason that is Spirit. This shift provides a model in which subjectivity is dynamic, embodied and contextually situated, causing reason to no longer be presumed in recognition, but to be immediately visible (Da Silva, 2007, pp. 47–48; Prins, 2022, p. 15).

Initially, this development might seem to be an important step forward, as it reconnects reason to the world through concrete experience without losing free will. However, this move also has significant consequences for the logic of exclusion. As Stephen Asma explains: if the noumenal essence of a thing is revealed through its phenomenal form, then a person's physical traits risk being interpreted as a direct expression of their internal essence. This creates a framework in which race and embodiment can be used to infer whether someone possesses rational autonomy, and thus, whether someone qualifies as worthy of recognition (Asma, 1995, p. 22). Racial and cultural differences, then, are no longer matters of contingency, but visible indicators of one's rational sufficiency or inadequacy (Prins, 2022, p. 15).

This creates a system in which recognition is no longer based on rational capacity or on whether that capacity is judged to be used correctly, but on whether it is perceived to be present in someone's physical characteristics. Da Silva argues that this turns recognition into a closed loop: reason is only acknowledged where it is instantly seen and already expected (Da Silva, 2007, pp. 88–89). When rationality can be judged based on physical appearance, entire populations whose bodies, behaviours and cultural expressions do not align with Eurocentric standards can be unfairly systematically disqualified from rational autonomy and moral recognition because of their external appearance. They are not simply excluded based on what they look like; rather, their appearance is taken as evidence of a lack of reason or moral capacity, making their exclusion seem natural and self-evident. Within this system, exclusion is thus no longer simply the result of individual prejudice, but a reflection of what is assumed to be true within a biased form of perception.

This is how the logic of exclusion, traced throughout this chapter, culminates in Hegel. Although it might not have been his intention, his philosophy cements the exclusionary dynamics initiated by Descartes and Kant by constructing a framework in which racial difference is no longer viewed as a contingency, but as an indicator and *cause* of one's rational autonomy and moral worth, which shifts exclusion from being the result of cultural or racial bias to being the logical expression of a presumed perceptible, objective, ontological truth. Once that link has been made, harm no longer requires justification. Entire populations can be dominated, exploited or used for the dumping of waste, precisely because their full personhood – and all the rights and protections this entails – is not acknowledged. In such a system, exclusion becomes intuitive; it transforms into the manifestation of an obvious, observable reality that can be read off the surface (Asma, 1995, p. 22; Prins, 2022, p. 15).

1.3 The Material Consequences of Enlightenment Thought

This analysis illustrates how a philosophical project that once promised emancipation ultimately ended up entrenching new forms of exclusion. With each successive framework, the criteria for inclusion became more restrictive, until exclusion no longer appeared as bias but as the expression of objective truth. At that point, exclusion is no longer an error to be corrected, but as a constitutive part of the system itself. Once rationality and autonomy are defined in terms of culturally specific, Eurocentric norms, entire populations can be deemed deficient by default. Their suffering, however severe, is rendered less visible and less urgent – not because their harm is lesser, but because dominant structures of recognition have normalised their disposability.

This logic explains why the daily dumping of textile waste in Ghana does not provoke the same moral and political urgency and outrage that a similar crisis might elicit in North America or Europe. The harm that is inflicted is not less significant – in fact, it is often more acute – but it is registered differently, or not at all. Response depends on the status of those harmed: groups long excluded from full recognition and thus not seen as fully worthy of protection. Their exposure to harm is not questioned, because established hierarchies of recognition have made their suffering appear less pressing, more intuitive, and therefore more acceptable.

This goes beyond marginalisation. It is a systemic denial of recognition that treats certain lives as fundamentally disposable and sorts them into categories of expendability and indispensability. This shows that the philosophies examined in this chapter are not abstract or outdated, but have become deeply embedded in the structures and practices that govern the global distribution of harm and protection today. The persistence of these logics is evident in ongoing patterns of waste colonialism, in which the question of who sends and who receives waste is formed by a long history of whose voices and suffering are acknowledged, and whose are systematically ignored. The fact that this arrangement is rarely questioned or viewed as unjust shows that the logic of exclusion lives on. Flows of waste follow flows of recognition. What is dumped, and where, reflects who is seen and protected and who is not.

The upcoming chapters will examine how these dynamics of exclusion are perpetuated and reappear in modern contexts, such as in self-interested corporate sustainability strategies, the moral ambiguities of consumer donation, and the global infrastructures of waste management that unequally organise the burdens of second-hand clothes. The foundation for analysing these problems has already been laid. This chapter has shown that underneath each of these contemporary issues lies the same core problem: a hierarchy of recognition, built over centuries, that continues to determine which lives are valued, whose suffering is acknowledged, and which harms are allowed to persist – unrecognised, unresisted and unresolved.

Chapter 2
Fast Fashion and the Ethics of Responsibility: Rethinking CSR Beyond Instrumental Logic

2.1 The Corporate Sustainability Paradox

At the organisational level, the fast fashion industry is characterised by an important tension: its enormous financial success is directly tied to environmentally unsustainable and socially harmful practices. While the industry has had a positive impact through its generation of economic benefits for some of its workers and the companies involved, and allows consumers to gain access to a great variety of affordable clothes, the operational model it uses has profound negative externalities: it worsens social and environmental harm, perpetuates waste colonialism and externalises the consequences of overproduction and overconsumption onto vulnerable communities. This tension between economic gain and socio-ecological concerns is not unique to the fast fashion industry, but rather accentuates a broader problem within modern capitalism in general: profit is almost exclusively prioritised over ethical concerns. In business ethics, this problem is referred to as the 'corporate sustainability paradox'.

The corporate sustainability paradox refers to the problem where organisations struggle to balance their interrelated – yet often conflicting – social, economic and environmental goals (Hahn et al., 2015, p. 297). The main tension in this paradox arises from companies' tendency to prioritise short-term profit over the achievement of long-term social and ecological goals. While companies often do recognise their responsibilities toward their employees, future generations and the environment, these concerns tend to be pushed aside for the sake of profitability due to the dominant instrumental logic that drives capitalist societies and the businesses that operate within them. The term 'instrumental logic' more specifically refers to the idea that economic goals in the traditional triad of social, economic and environmental concerns are intrinsically prioritised over the other two dimensions, causing those to only be pursued insofar as they also contribute to financial gain (Hahn et al., 2015, p. 297). As such, when these 'secondary' goals of social and environmental improvement can no longer be aligned with the primary goal of maximising short-term economic growth, they tend to be dismissed. This shows that according to this instrumental logic, corporations' commitment to taking social and environmental accountability is *conditional* and ultimately remains subordinate to the company's financial self-interest.

In fast fashion, this paradox is also evident, particularly when looking at recent statistics. On the one hand, the industry's profit has increased by 10,74% in 2024, making it a 150,82 billion dollar industry that shows no sign of decelerating its growth. On the other hand, the fast fashion industry has become responsible for 10% of all global carbon emissions, 35% of all microplastics in the world's oceans, and 92 million tonnes of textile waste per year, of which only 15% is recycled, while the rest is incinerated or dumped in landfills, deserts or other natural environments (Rai, 2024). Since these harms have increasingly become a point of discussion in recent years, many fashion retailers have started to publicly acknowledge their contributions to these problems by undertaking steps to initiate change. Examples of this are the introduction of initiatives like Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) models, the use of recycled materials for their collections, or offering clothing rental services. However, thus far, the sincerity of these actions can be called into question due to the fact that these seemingly positive practices are often still motivated by instrumental interests, causing them to function as window dressing or greenwashing tactics, which in the end only further the profit of the industry while appearing more environmentally responsible to the public (Eabrasu, 2014, p. 435).

This underscores the need to acknowledge the corporate sustainability paradox in fast fashion, as the financial success of this sector remains inherently dependent on the practices that contribute to record levels of fashion waste, inequality and pollution. This paradox, however, involves more than just the practical tension between financial goals and social or environmental ones – it also points to a deeper philosophical dilemma. At its core, the paradox reveals a friction between two different ways of thinking: one that places profit above all else, and another that insists that social and environmental concerns deserve equal – or more – consideration. These two different viewpoints often come into conflict. Therefore, resolving the paradox is not simply a matter of 'improving' business practices; it requires questioning the underlying values and assumptions that drive corporations' actions. Because of this, the corporate sustainability paradox is not just a business problem, but also a philosophical one.

This leads to the question: How can the fast fashion industry, operating within the capitalist framework, reconcile its pursuit of financial growth with the need to address waste colonialism and adopt sustainable practices? And an important follow-up question to this is: How can the fast fashion industry move beyond its current superficial Corporate Social Responsibility efforts that often amount to greenwashing, and adopt a long-term, transformative approach to sustainability instead, without neglecting the economic dimension of the triad?

In this chapter, I address these questions in two parts. Part I situates the fast fashion industry and its challenges in the broader context of capitalism – the economic system that shapes and drives it. By tracing capitalism's instrumental logic and the rise of fast fashion back to the Industrial Revolution, I explore how these two phenomena may have arisen alongside each other, with fast fashion embodying and reinforcing capitalism's pursuit of profit, speed and growth. Due to this interconnection, it becomes clear that the roots of fast fashion's problems may run deeper and be more structurally embedded than many critical fashion theorists typically assume. This suggests that the broader systemic influence of instrumental capitalist and modernist structures must also be taken into account when addressing the industry's exploitative practices. Therefore, I present various perspectives regarding the nature and influence of capitalism's instrumental logic to explore whether the harmful practices within the fast fashion industry should be seen – as Adam Smith proposes – as temporary market failures that can be corrected over time, or – as Michel Serres and David Harvey argue – as structural problems of a system that fundamentally relies on resource extraction, waste generation, and the exploitation of labour and ecosystems. Ultimately, the goal of this part is not to blindly criticise capitalism, but to critically examine how its instrumental logic may influence corporate decision-making in ways that structurally deprioritise social and environmental concerns in favour of financial goals.

Following this analysis, Part II is focused on exploring the limitations of current CSR practices and finding ways to make CSR more responsible and transparent. Using real-world examples, I show why current initiatives often fall short in addressing the fast fashion industry's problems. As an alternative to conventional CSR approaches, which tend to oversimplify 'good' and 'bad' practices and therefore often result in performative, surface-level solutions, I will explore more concrete philosophical frameworks for achieving sustainable change. Here, the goal is not to *solve* the corporate sustainability paradox, but to find a way to make sure that the economic dimension of the triad no longer inherently outweighs the other concerns – as it does when corporations continue to act according to an instrumental logic (Hahn et al., 2015, p. 297). Basing my argumentation on Marian Eabrasu's (2012) moral pluralism and Hahn et al.'s (2015) integrative framework on corporate responsibility, I explore whether corporations can adopt a more refined ethical framework that moves beyond instrumental and reductionist thinking, toward a nuanced and context-specific understanding

of moral responsibility. This approach encourages companies to develop their own moral vision by creating a realistic, self-directed plan for social improvement, which can lead to a more sustainable path forward for the fashion industry. By incorporating the perspectives of a broader array of stakeholders – including those that are not directly involved in the company but that can still influence the company's business decisions, such as NGO's, social activists and affected communities – and incorporating long-term planning into their strategies, I propose that companies can work towards improving their social and environmental impact without compromising their economic goals, thus leading to a fashion industry that is both more transparent and responsible (Hahn et al., 2015, p. 299).

Part I: A Root Cause Analysis of Capitalism's Instrumental Logic in Fast Fashion

2.2 Industrialisation and The Rise of Fast Fashion

To better understand the ethical challenges posed by the corporate sustainability paradox in fast fashion, it is important to situate the workings of the industry within the broader framework of capitalism, because this paradox reflects both the clash between financial, social and environmental goals, and a deeper conflict between profit-driven decision-making and broader conceptions of corporate responsibility. Capitalism, in this context, functions as both the economic system that shapes and drives the industry and as an ideological and epistemological framework that influences what Western societies value and how they define progress. Contextualising fast fashion in this way redirects the focus from the poor operational practices of individual companies and instead focuses on broader, structural patterns that may incline companies to systematically prioritise short-term benefits and growth over long-term sustainability. These patterns include the externalisation of waste, exploitation of labour and environmental degradation for the sake of profit. Although there is no universal agreement among philosophers and critical theorists on whether these patterns are the direct result of capitalism or stem from contingent historical or institutional circumstances – a debate that will be further developed in the next section – analysing their historical development without assigning normative judgment yet can give insight into why principles such as speed, growth, and efficiency have become so ingrained in modern Western society and the fast fashion industry in the first place.

While it is clear that fast fashion and modern capitalism strongly mirror each other through their emphasis on growth, speed, competition and efficiency, the origins of these interconnections are still relatively underexplored in academic literature. Particularly in critical fashion theory, there are two main theories regarding the turning points of fashion: one traces the roots of fast fashion back to the globalisation and outsourcing of production of the mid-to-late 20th-century (Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2022, p. 813), while the other points to the introduction of speed and trend replication-based business models by Zara and H&M in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the main cause of the acceleration of fashion (Tokatli, 2008, p. 23). However, although these moments both mark important shifts in the way fashion is produced, consumed and marketed, they overlook that the push for efficiency, affordability and higher levels of production that characterise the fast fashion industry are not 20th century inventions. Rather, these developments can be traced back to the technological and economic changes that were brought about by the Industrial Revolution (Hroch, 2010, p. 108).

Whereas before this period, clothing production had been an expensive, decentralised, time- and labour-consuming practice that heavily relied on manual work and craftsmanship of skilled artisans, industrial innovations like the cotton gin and power loom turned the sourcing of materials and the

manufacturing of garments into mechanised processes that could be performed on a mass scale (Zakim, 1999, p. 64). These transformations in the production of clothing, however, were not isolated: they both reflected and contributed to a broader societal and economic restructuration in which industrialisation caused capitalism to shift from a mostly feudal and agricultural system into one increasingly centred around profit and productivity (Stubbs, 2023). This shift was not only material, but also conceptual, as it established efficiency and calculability as the new standard of productivity. As machines and factories became more widespread in urbanising cities, people were slowly but surely drawn away from their agricultural work into higher-paying factory jobs. Consequently, continuous and consistent economic growth became possible, as production was no longer dependent on unpredictable, external conditions but rather relied on the predictable circumstances of the factory.

Moreover, due to this consistent economic growth, people started gaining more disposable income, which, in combination with the expansion of cheap, mass-produced goods, contributed to the rise of consumerism (Stubbs, 2023). In this context, the changes of the Industrial Revolution did more than just mechanise production methods; they introduced a new logic of growth that replaced small-scale and need-based production with a drive for acceleration and accumulation. This new logic, which can be called *capitalism's instrumental logic*, deeply impacted the fashion industry, as factory-made clothing allowed consumers to buy and discard garments more frequently, causing consumers to be able to afford to treat their clothes as disposable commodities. Fast fashion later reinforced this by embracing 'planned obsolescence' – the deliberate act of lowering the quality and durability of clothes – (Slade, 2006, p. 5), to ensure that clothes would move "*through*, rather than merely *into*, consumer households," (Liboiron, 2021, p. 1). This shift, visible in both companies and consumers, is central to the functioning and evolving problems of the fast fashion industry, as it constructed individuals as *consumers* and has detached people from the goods they purchase, leading to a shift in how labour and value are viewed in Western, capitalist societies. In this way, fast fashion's problems are strongly connected to both industrialisation and modern capitalism.

Making these historical connections explicit is important, as it suggests that the roots of fast fashion's problems lie deeper than they initially appear. Building on the logic of exclusion introduced in the previous chapter, this historical analysis of modern capitalism and the rise of fast fashion further illustrates how problems like waste colonialism may not just result from unsustainable practices by individual companies in the present, but are also connected to, and influenced by, broader systematic factors like modernist ways of thinking and industrial capitalism. Since these structures – and particularly, modern capitalism's instrumental logic and the problems that stem from it – persist in the present and continue to influence the economic world, it becomes increasingly important to take a closer look at how this system is organised and sustained.

2.3 The Nature of Capitalism: Collectively Beneficial or Instrumentally Dispossessive?

Building on this historical analysis, the next step is to consider how different philosophical perspectives interpret the nature of capitalism and the logic that underlies it. If fast fashion's exploitative practices do not merely stem from isolated 'bad apples' in the industry, but from broader historical and economic patterns that motivate harmful corporate actions, then efforts to address these harms must ask the question: what kind of system is modern capitalism, and what implications does this have for companies wanting to improve their operational practices within this system? Philosophers differ greatly in their responses to this question. While some strongly believe in the just functioning of the free market and defend the position that capitalism can fundamentally generate

collective benefits by directing self-interest into broader societal improvement, others contend that capitalism structurally and relentlessly prioritises the maximisation of growth and profit over all other considerations, which inevitably leads to social and environmental harm. Looking at these different perspectives is important, as these theories have practical stakes: how we view capitalism helps determine what kind of interventions are necessary and effective for achieving change in the fast fashion industry. If capitalism is a system that is capable of self-correction, market-driven incentives and voluntary CSR initiatives might be sufficient for becoming more socially and environmentally responsible; however, if capitalism inherently produces harm, then structural interventions, regulatory frameworks and other, deeper systematic changes are needed to mitigate fast fashion's harms. Thus, to formulate successful solutions, we must explore different philosophical interpretations of capitalism's instrumental rationality to assess which path is most viable and what this means for the possibility of reform.

The first perspective on this topic comes from critical theorist Richard Wilkinson (1973), who characterises capitalism as a deeply reactive, instrumental system. Basing his ideas on a historical analysis, Wilkinson argues that capitalism's evolution from a feudal into an instrumental system, as well as the technological innovations that took place during this period, did not solely take place with the goal of progress in mind. Rather, he interprets these developments as the direct result of "a valiant struggle of a society with its back to the ecological wall," (Wilkinson, 1973, p. 126). As societies became increasingly urbanised and industrialised, Wilkinson argues that there were simply not enough traditional resources like wood to sustain the growing demand for them, leading societies to innovate machines that ran on alternative fuels like steam power or coal instead (Wilkinson, 1988, p. 86–87).

Although these adaptations seem to be improvements in themselves, Wilkinson points out that there are complications involved, as in situations of scarcity where external pressures are high, *instrumental rationality* becomes the dominant logic. Societies start looking for the quickest, simplest and most affordable solution to overcome their limitations. The problem, however, is that although 'quick-fix' instrumental solutions *are* improvements in the crisis context in which they are introduced, they most likely would not be considered true improvements in an equilibrium situation. This is illustrated by the harm many machines from this period have caused to both the environment and the people operating them. As such, although Wilkinson does not explicitly morally disapprove of modern capitalism, his thought implies that while it historically makes sense that capitalism has evolved to be this way, it is not necessarily beneficial that it continues to operate like this in the present. Therefore, he emphasises that we must now critically consider how our relationships toward our social and ecological context have changed, so we can reassess if the set of choices made during the Industrial Revolution would still be considered rational and justifiable now (Wilkinson, 1988, p. 97).

While Wilkinson portrays capitalism's instrumental logic as a reactive but not necessarily intrinsically positive adaptation to scarcity, philosopher Adam Smith offers a more optimistic perspective. He interprets this instrumental logic as a collectively beneficial – and even *moral* – part of free market societies. Smith substantiates this view in *The Wealth of Nations*, in which he posits that when individuals act according to their self-interest, they are unknowingly guided by an 'invisible hand' that benefits society as a whole (Smith, 2007, p. 349). For example, although a businessman may only pursue his own profit, in doing so, he might inadvertently provide jobs, services and goods that others need, leading to economic growth and better living conditions for everyone. This conception of a self-regulating market is based on the traditions of Stoicism and Newtonian science, which both view the world as a coherent, self-balancing system in which all parts work harmoniously together. Smith extends these principles of harmony to economics, where he believes they also apply and

cause market forces – like the forces of nature – to naturally correct any imbalances (Klein, 2003, pp. 387–388). From this perspective, selfishness and instrumental rationality, when mediated by free-market mechanisms, result in a self-regulating system where benefits are naturally – although not necessarily equally – distributed throughout society. Therefore, Smith does not perceive selfishness and instrumentalism as threats, but as natural and fundamental parts of economics that drive competition, innovation, and efficiency, which in the end, lead to collective benefit and progress.

Although Wilkinson and Smith each give different justifications of capitalism's instrumental logic, with one being historical and the other moral, both assume that instrumentality can be justified or even collectively beneficial. Michel Serres' philosophy, however, raises concerns about the long-term consequences of this logic. Despite the fact that he does not directly respond to either thinker in his work, his ideas regarding capitalist modernity can be interpreted as critiquing both of their perspectives.

Serres offers a different evaluation of the motivations behind Western society's shift toward industrial capitalism than Wilkinson. While Wilkinson emphasises that this shift was necessitated by limitations in natural resources, framing industrial progress as a by-product of the search for a solution to scarcity rather than this period's main goal, Serres views the development and consequences of modern capitalism as the direct result of humanity's *will to appropriate* (Serres, 2012, p. 192). According to Serres, capitalism is – or, can become – destructive due to the fact that it amplifies what he sees as a basic human tendency toward appropriation, allowing this tendency to expand beyond its natural and necessary boundaries into a form of systematic expansionism. He regards the systematic instrumentalism capitalism promotes to be extremely harmful, as he believes it has manifested in a "global invasion of pollution" (Serres, 2011, p. 47). This entails that the scale and mode of appropriation by contamination in both corporations and individuals have increased drastically, to the point where almost everybody now has a globally polluting footprint, instead of being limited to their direct environment (Bakhtiar, 2022, p. 139). Moreover, Serres points out that the size of this footprint is directly linked to capitalist growth, as it grows bigger the more income one has. Because of this, he considers capitalism and modernism, which have embodied this instrumental logic, to be "the two horses that speed the ecological carriage as expected, in the direction of a cliff" (Dolphijn, 2018, p. 4).

This critique can also be read as a response to Smith's optimistic view of self-regulating markets. Whereas Smith's theory heavily relies on the assumption that achieving profit can go hand in hand with meeting social and environmental goals due to the market's self-correcting forces, Serres' thought suggests that such an equilibrium does not actually naturally occur in practice because the instrumental logic of capitalism actively undermines this. Smith, however, defends his theory by arguing that human nature itself safeguards the market's principles from being undermined by self-interest, as selfishness is naturally counterbalanced by humans' inherent sense of sympathy or 'fellow-feeling' (Klein, 2003, p. 389). Nature, according to Smith, "has adjusted our sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, to the conveniency both of the individual and of society," (Smith, 1976, p. 188). This implies that actors participating in the free market system are internally guided by moral sentiments that ensure no structural disharmony can occur. However, Serres' philosophy problematises this assumption by pointing out that this harmonic view of human nature ignores the ways in which capitalism structurally incentivises the prioritisation of growth and profit over other-regarding concerns. He does not deny the existence of sympathy or the fact that it *can* influence business decisions, but he does argue that due to how modern capitalism functions, it is often overridden in practice.

Moreover, Serres' philosophy criticises Smith's for not taking the sheer complexity and scale of the destruction that industrial capitalism is capable of in a globalised world into account. He exemplifies this by pointing to waste colonialism in *Malfeasance* (2011), which is a situation in which self-interest and instrumentalism face little to no consequences or restraints and end up leading to exploitation and injustice. From a Serresian perspective, capitalism does not operate through moral self-regulation, but through a systematic logic of instrumentality that amplifies the human will to appropriate and transforms it into a system of rampant global expansion. Within this system, the accumulation of resources and wealth is not just permitted, but also encouraged beyond sustainable or just limits, and social and environmental costs come to be accepted as tolerable or even necessary costs of growth. Thus, although Serres does not deny that capitalism can lead to benefits, his thought raises doubt about whether these benefits are sufficient, or even morally relevant, when the system itself structurally enables harm. As such, in contrast to Smith, Serres views disbalance, rather than balance, as the characteristic feature of modern capitalism.

Marxism analyst David Harvey (2003) expands on Serres' critique by showing exactly *how* capitalism undermines the harmonious outcomes Smith imagined by pointing to the mechanism of *accumulation by dispossession* which Serres then riffs on. This concept refers to the process by which resources and opportunities are taken away from people – particularly those who are already marginalised – to benefit powerful actors like governments or corporations (Samson, 2015, p. 815). An example of this is when a public landfill is enclosed by a private company, causing individuals who earn money by informally selling discarded materials to become dispossessed and lose their source of income. Their knowledge and labour are appropriated by the company for the sake of profit, while they are simultaneously denied access. This process illustrates the fragility of Smith's belief in capitalism as a morally self-correcting system, as in practice, persistent structural imbalances, which are grounded in historical injustices like the modernist logic of exclusion, colonialism and exploitative systems of labour, prevent economic benefits from naturally regulating themselves. Consequently, instead of leading to balance, acts of privatisation and commodification of previously public goods tend to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the few, at the expense of the many. Because of this, Harvey argues that capitalism actively contributes to the entrenchment of inequality by reinforcing the structures that deny marginalised communities access to the benefits of the capitalist market system, causing modern capitalism and its instrumental logic to contribute to the perpetuation of their marginalisation (Samson, 2015, pp. 814–815).

Taken together, these different perspectives about capitalism's nature provide different answers to the question whether capitalism's instrumental rationality can be reconciled with social and ecological well-being, or if it inherently undermines this. While Wilkinson and Smith view capitalism as a (temporarily) beneficial system whose instrumental logic allows for the possibility of societal benefit, Harvey and Serres argue that in capitalism, harm is intentionally, strategically and systematically shifted onto the environment and vulnerable communities to achieve profit. This shows that capitalism has not only adapted to the ecological constraints it faced, like Wilkinson posits, but that it has also actively restructured humanity's relation to its social and ecological context to serve its goals. This suggests that capitalism plays an active role in influencing how social and environmental concerns are handled. Serres' and Harvey's critiques of capitalism's instrumental logic ultimately have far-reaching consequences for addressing the corporate sustainability paradox in fast fashion, as they show that modern capitalism does not just often solely conflict with socio-ecological goals, but also actively discourages their pursuit when these goals do not align with the primary goal of profit maximisation. As such, their philosophies show us that if the very structure of capitalism is based on the externalisation of harm for the sake of financial growth, any meaningful efforts to

improve the resulting social and environmental problems must also confront capitalism's underlying instrumental logic.

Part II: Exploring Possibilities to Reconcile Profitability and Socio-Environmental Responsibility in Fast Fashion

2.4 Instrumental CSR and the Ambiguity of Responsibility in Fast Fashion

Having gained insight into how capitalism's instrumental logic leads to the structural prioritisation of short-term financial benefits over social and ecological concerns, we can now explore how fast fashion companies attempt to address this issue, particularly through the lens of the corporate sustainability paradox: the problem companies face in trying to balance conflicting social, environmental and economic goals (Hahn et al., 2015, p. 297). One way in which fast fashion retailers have tried to address this paradox is by launching Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. In essence, CSR is as a self-regulatory mechanism through which companies can hold themselves accountable to their stakeholders, the public and those affected by their actions by implementing strategies that have a positive, rather than exploitative, impact, and transparently reporting on their results. While the integration of social and ecological concerns into corporate decision-making processes seems to be a positive development, in reality, it also has many complications, as many CSR initiatives continue to operate within the same instrumental logic that has created the issues they are meant to solve. As a result, instead of challenging modern capitalism's instrumental logic, CSR often ends up reinforcing it.

This can be explained by distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Graafland and Mazereeuw-Van der Duijn Schouten (2012) explain that companies that act based on intrinsic, value-driven motivations implement CSR because they genuinely believe in the importance of improving their social and environmental impact, regardless of whether this leads to immediate financial benefits. Companies driven by extrinsic motivations, on the other hand, implement CSR as a means to an end. For example, to improve their reputation, comply with external regulations or appeal to conscious consumers – motivations that all ultimately serve profitability (Valor, 2005). While most companies often act based on a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, this distinction does raise the question: is CSR a genuine expression of moral responsibility, or does it merely serve as a strategic means to self-interested ends?

In fast fashion – an industry that pushes the instrumental values of speed and profitability to their limit – extrinsic motivations for CSR are overwhelmingly dominant. This tends to lead to a 'business case' approach, where companies only pursue socio-environmental goals insofar as they also lead to profitability (Craig Smith, 2003, p. 15). Consequently, companies gain a selective focus on easily achievable and marketable goals, while deeper structural problems that require more effort and investment to solve are neglected. A clear example of this is H&M's garment collection programme, which is meant to promote sustainability by recycling, reusing and repurposing consumers' old textiles (H&M Group, 2025). However, an investigative report by journalists Lindberg & Wennman (2024) showed that, despite H&M's claims that the collected garments would be properly overseen throughout their recycling process, none of the ten garments they donated had reached the assigned recycling centres. Instead, all the clothes were incinerated, discarded in landfills in Eastern Europe or the Global South, or turned into low-value recycled materials. While this misleading practice is already bad in itself, it was worsened by the fact that H&M rewards customers with a 15% discount for every donation, which only further encourages overconsumption. As such, although H&M has

taken steps to improve its transparency since this incident was brought to light, its 'responsible' CSR initiative could be deemed performative, as it ultimately only worsened the harm the company claimed to lessen.

Despite such critiques, some theorists and corporations still argue that instrumentally motivated CSR can lead to beneficial results. From this pragmatic perspective, if implementing a CSR strategy and doing the 'right' thing also helps the company make money, then the company will have a good reason to implement CSR and ethical behaviour into their business strategy. In other words, companies will behave ethically because it is part of their competitive, financial strategy. Defenders of this approach often substantiate their argument by stating that impact matters more than intentions – a perspective that is known as 'consequentialism' in philosophy (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2023). If extrinsically motivated CSR leads to less pollution, less depletion of resources and more recycling, then it is not ethically relevant if the motivation behind these outcomes was extrinsic rather than intrinsic.

However, although this argument rightfully acknowledges that extrinsic motivations can lead to social and environmental improvements in some cases, it does not address the deeper philosophical problem: that companies that follow instrumental CSR only care about doing the 'right' thing when it benefits them. As such, companies' responsibility in such cases is based on instrumental motivations and convenience, rather than a genuine understanding that their actions are harmful and the moral commitment to change. This kind of CSR undermines ethical integrity and long-term commitment, as it makes responsibility conditional on profitability and allows companies to abandon their moral commitments when they become inconvenient. As such, instrumental and extrinsically motivated CSR continues to operate within modern capitalism's instrumental logic and reinforces the structures it should counter. This shows that the problem of CSR does not merely lie in its outcomes, but in how these are motivated, justified and achieved. If responsibility is only pursued as a means to an end, instead of as an end in itself, it loses its moral impact.

This reveals that there are deeper philosophical questions to be asked to achieve successful and meaningful CSR. If responsibility is only pursued under the condition that it serves profitability, does it still count as genuine moral responsibility, or is it merely instrumental? While this question echoes the classic ethical dilemma of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, the issue in fast fashion goes further. It is not just about motive, but about how this logic of instrumentality can be used to create the appearance of responsibility while avoiding deeper, structural change. When accountability is reduced to a strategy companies can use to improve their image, CSR runs the risk of becoming contingent and conditional. This is a difficult issue to tackle, because the resistance against reform is not just about individual companies' desires and beliefs; it is also structurally built into the system itself. Fast fashion has embodied the industrial capitalist values of expansion, productivity and disposability. The challenge, then, becomes not just how to improve CSR in practice, but also how to restructure it so that it stimulates intrinsic responsibility, even if its implementation comes with sacrifices, inconveniences or unwanted costs.

To explore how this kind of responsibility can be achieved under modern capitalism, Part II of this chapter explores two philosophical perspectives: moral pluralism by Marian Eabrasu (2012) and the integrative approach by Hahn et al. (2015). These offer different ethical and practical approaches to make CSR more intrinsically responsible. Rather than viewing CSR as something that can be perfected through stricter regulation, these perspectives provide a more fundamental restructuring of what it means to be responsible under capitalism in the first place. Building on Part I's critique of capitalism's instrumental logic, I argue that the integration of moral pluralism and the integrative approach offers a promising philosophical basis for structural, transformative change within modern capitalism.

Consequently, I contend that if the fast fashion industry integrates these moral frameworks into its CSR strategies and operational logic, remains open to the tensions of the corporate sustainability paradox, and approaches responsibility as an essentially contested, dialogical process that requires continuous reflection, it can become more genuinely responsible.

2.5 Rethinking Responsibility: Moral Pluralism and the Relativity of 'Good' Practice

Marian Eabrasu's *moral pluralism* philosophically reframes what responsibility means in business ethics. Going against the notion that the corporate sustainability paradox can be solved, Eabrasu's morally pluralistic approach to CSR begins with the acknowledgement that the tensions companies face often do not have a single right answer. Therefore, instead of looking for a perfect solution, moral pluralism stimulates companies to treat CSR as a practice that will never be fully closed and will always require ongoing reflection, dialogue and adjustments. From this perspective, it is not the almost unachievable goal of resolving corporate tensions under modern capitalism that constitutes moral action, but it is the willingness to stay in interaction with them and to continuously reflect upon what it means to be responsible that matters (Eabrasu, 2012, p. 429).

This theory starts from the observation that, on the surface, there are relatively few controversial problems in CSR, and there generally appears to be widespread agreement regarding what constitutes 'good' practice in the fast fashion industry. Reducing pollution, closing down sweatshops and paying employees a liveable wage, for example, seem to be self-evidently 'good' practices. However, from a morally pluralist standpoint, the strict definitions of these norms are based on contestable assumptions of what moral concepts like responsibility, harm, intention and consequences mean, as these all have different – and sometimes even incompatible – meanings in philosophy. Most CSR models treat ethics as an extension of the law, which implies that moral obligations can be wholly derived from legal obligations. However, this is problematic, because it implies that any legal system is factually moral and therefore immune to criticism. This confuses compliance to laws with moral behaviour, and ignores that laws themselves can also lead to injustices, particularly in contexts that are shaped by post-colonial power imbalances or corrupt regimes. Thus, although legal CSR models are meant to provide an easy-to-follow 'moral' basis for corporate action, Eabrasu argues that such frameworks run the risk of simplifying the complexity of moral questions, and can reduce ethics to compliance (Eabrasu, 2012, pp. 429, 437). This is exemplified by the logic of exclusion discussed in the previous chapter: ethical thinking in mainstream CSR becomes restricted by narrow definitions of responsibility as set by institutions that equate morality to legal obligations, which often excludes the deeper harms experienced by communities such as those in Ghana, as harm is solely defined in ways that align with their corporate interests.

To prevent this from happening, Eabrasu argues that all assumptions of goodness in CSR practices should be viewed as "essentially contested" concepts that are "permanently and fundamentally subject to revision and question" – no matter how generally accepted their interpretations may seem (Eabrasu, 2012, p. 433). This approach is particularly relevant due to the global network the fast fashion industry operates on, as Eabrasu's moral pluralism acknowledges that different societies, cultures or stakeholders can have competing ideas of 'goodness' and of what one ought to do given the same set of facts. For example, what corporations in the Global North may consider 'good' and 'responsible' action, such as exporting second-hand clothes to Ghana where these can be resold to 'help' the local economy, such actions can simultaneously be considered exploitative and undermining by Ghanaians. As such, moral pluralism reinforces that goodness and responsibility are ambiguous, relative and context-dependent concepts that need to be reflected upon and discussed

openly to achieve agreement, rather than be viewed as absolute truths or a set of rules that everyone can blindly follow (Eabrasu, 2012, p. 435).

This relativity of moral concepts has far-reaching implications for CSR, as it encourages companies to develop their own normative positions and take a true, personal stance on ethical issues and what responsibility means for them, rather than treating CSR as a checklist of universally agreed upon duties. This goes against isomorphism in the fast fashion industry: the tendency companies have to imitate others' CSR strategies or borrow their notion of 'morality' from counselling agencies, academia or the media to conform to what is expected of them (Brown, 2005; Eabrasu, 2012, p. 430). Such conformism is problematic, because it obscures whether a company genuinely stands behind the morals it presents or if it simply follows them to appear legitimate and socially engaged. Moreover, it creates an unrealistic situation where the majority of the corporations display the same moral commitments and thus supposedly all have the exact same values and standpoints (Eabrasu, 2012, p. 433).

In moral pluralism, being accountable becomes less about *appearing* good and more about being willing and able to openly articulate why a certain approach is chosen in a specific situation, and how this decision will help the company become more responsible – particularly in imperfect situations where past wrongs need to be made right. This approach is supported by the fact that moral pluralism accepts mistakes and imperfect action as part of moral action. Eabrasu stresses the importance of implementing room for mistakes, because it prevents companies from resorting to performative CSR and greenwashing. When failed efforts at taking responsibility are not treated as permanently damaging, but as opportunities to take accountability and reassess their path of action, she argues that companies will be more likely to keep trying to work toward true solutions rather than settling for partial ones. As such, moral pluralism emphasises that the point of CSR should not be to permanently end all contradictions or comply with superficial expectations, but to stay with the tensions and create space for self-reflection and honest, context-sensitive decision-making in the industry (Eabrasu, 2012, p. 430).

Finally, a legitimate critique moral pluralism faces is its potential to be used to justify harmful practices. For example, a fast fashion company could turn to utilitarianism to justify exploitative labour, or could frame waste colonialism as morally neutral using libertarianism's harm principle, which only considers physical violence to be harm (Eabrasu, 2012, p. 436). To prevent this from happening, morally pluralistic CSR must also be supported by mechanisms that ensure accountability. These mechanisms could involve the invitation of feedback from primary and secondary stakeholders, such as NGOs, environmental groups and affected communities, to which they must clearly and transparently explain their actions. If a company fails to convince these parties why its actions are responsible improvements, it must adjust its policies in response to criticism. In this way, moral pluralism changes how responsibility is understood and approached in the fast fashion industry, as instead of treating stakeholders' input as a necessity, this model reframes it as an ongoing, dialogical and dynamic process. Additionally, individual company policies could be supplemented by general, industry-wide regulations, such as obligations for companies to participate in Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programmes, to guarantee that they are truly lessening their impact and face legal consequences if they do not. In this way, moral pluralism does not end up reproducing capitalism's instrumental logic, but can lead to increased responsibility and more intrinsic commitment to change, as it restructures CSR as an intentional system of morality. The strength of moral pluralism thus lies in its ability to turn the openness of the corporate sustainability paradox into something beneficial, as it can accommodate the complexity of real-world ethical problems and

provides the context-sensitivity required to address them, giving companies the freedom to establish intrinsic moral responsibility in their own way.

2.6 Reframing the Corporate Sustainability Paradox: Synthesis as a Means to Achieve Corporate Responsibility

Hahn et al.'s (2015) *integrative approach* to CSR can be viewed as an extension of Eabrasu's moral pluralism. While Eabrasu lays down the foundation for morally pluralistic CSR by emphasising the importance of openness, ambiguity and the need to remain in dialogue about moral tensions, Hahn et al.'s integrative approach provides a structural framework that can help put her theory into practice. The integrative approach serves as a counterpart to modern capitalism's instrumental logic. Instead of only pursuing social and environmental goals insofar as these also have financial benefits, the integrative approach is based on the belief that companies should pursue multiple, conflicting goals from the corporate sustainability paradox at the same time, without intrinsically prioritising one goal over another, as the dimensions of this triad are all interrelated, interdependent and equally necessary to achieve meaningful corporate responsibility. Although it might seem contradictory to pursue conflicting goals simultaneously, Hahn et al. argue that this contradiction is actually the very condition on which ethical responsibility can be built, as achieving sustainable and responsible CSR requires that companies must work *within* the paradox, rather than against it. In this way, similarly to Eabrasu, Hahn et al. frame contradiction not as a problem to overcome, but as something companies must necessarily relate to (Hahn et al., 2015, pp. 298, 300).

According to Hahn et al., the integrative approach to the corporate sustainability paradox's tensions can take on three different strategies: acceptance, separation or synthesis. While all of them work within the contradiction and are therefore integrative, the first two strategies contain too significant risks to apply to the fast fashion industry, as they allow ethical behaviour to remain optional and therefore do not necessarily result in systematic change. The synthesis strategy, however, is more ambitious and strongly aligns with the ideas of moral pluralism, which makes it more suitable for improving CSR in fast fashion (Hahn et al., 2015, p. 305).

The synthesis strategy is not aimed at solving or eliminating contradictions, but at finding ways to work through them by looking for new ways to connect the opposing poles of the paradox, such as through a mediating or overarching logic. The goal of this strategy is not to merge the conflicting elements or to choose between them, but to invent a new framework in which economic, social and environmental concerns are connected in a way where they mutually reinforce, rather than undermine, each other. An example of a case in which the synthesis strategy has been successfully implemented in fast fashion is Adidas' development of a fully nature-based, biodegradable shoe that is affordable, sustainable and of higher quality than their usual, synthetic shoes. Here, cost-effectiveness and sustainability do not exist in competition, but are synthesised into one product. Consequently, this innovation allows the company to move beyond a closed-loop system, "and into an infinite loop – or even no loop at all," (*Adidas Unveils World's First Performance Shoe Made From Biosteel® Fiber - Adidas Group*, 2016). These shoes are the result of a newly invented framework that connects profitability and environmental responsibility in a win-win or 'both/and' solution that benefits stakeholders with opposing priorities simultaneously: the shoes are better for the environment and the consumer, as they are both biodegradable and of higher quality than the brands' other shoes, while their development simultaneously benefits Adidas financially, as the shoe is profitable and positively influences the reputation of the company (Hahn et al., 2015, p. 306).

Since the synthesis strategy does not choose between socio-environmental or financial considerations, but reconfigures their relationship in a transformative way, and translates the company's established moral values into practice, it shows a deep commitment to integrity that complements moral pluralism. It shifts CSR from being characterised by compromise and conditionality to being actually transformative. This strategy thus offers a practical framework through which moral pluralism can be realised, and exemplifies what intrinsically motivated corporate social responsibility could look like. Synthesis goes against the oversimplified binary of profit versus responsibility, sincerity versus performativity, and 'good' versus 'bad' corporate practice, and reframes CSR as a continuous, context-sensitive moral practice that is conditioned upon contradiction. Although synthesis strategies are still rare in practice they offer a potential, more responsible way forward for the fast fashion industry, in a way that requires companies to decentralise – but not discard – their financial concerns. While learning to shift their focus from short-term growth to long-term sustainability may be difficult, it is precisely in this discomfort that moral responsibility becomes real: companies learn to stay with the tension, and in doing so, push back against the axiomatic prioritisation of profitability. Thus, Hahn et al. and Eabrasu show that if responsibility is to become part of a system that rewards the evasion of it, it must take on the form of continuous commitment and trial and error – not perfection. A morally pluralistic, integrative CSR model is neither idealistic nor instrumental, but open, dialogical and, most of all, *alive*.

2.7 Morally Pluralistic, Integrative CSR: Toward an Intrinsically Motivated, Reflexive and Accountable Fast Fashion Industry

However, one final, important question remains: how can we ensure that companies will want to implement these strategies, rather than leaving intrinsically motivated CSR as a far-away aspiration or unreachable ideal? The answer lies in making ethical business practices beneficial and desirable in ways that go beyond merely following regulations and complying with industry norms. As transparency, justice and long-term sustainability are becoming increasingly valued by both consumers and investors, such factors can stimulate companies to take their CSR more seriously and to adopt a more morally pluralistic and integrative approach. In this context, CSR can become something that benefits companies both financially and reputation-wise in the long run – as is exemplified by Adidas. If companies begin to see the development of a personal CSR initiative and the implementation of personal ethics into their business not as an external obligation, but as part of their role in society and the environment – and as a way to ensure their own long-term sustainability – then moral responsibility becomes a source of value in itself. This value is thus not based on marketing or public image, but on a company's own ethical standards and self-defined commitments.

Additionally, open conversations in the fast fashion industry, where companies can share their concerns, failures and progress, are essential to creating a culture where ethical decision-making becomes the standard instead of the exception. Moral pluralism provides a basis for this by refusing to prescribe a one-size-fits-all answer to the question of what constitutes 'good' practice, as the form moral responsibility takes on can differ for each company and industry, depending on their unique contexts and problems. Mirroring this, morally pluralistic CSR does not attempt to present a definitive solution to the sustainability paradox. Instead, it offers a different way for companies to approach it: not as a problem to be solved, but as an ongoing moral dilemma that requires creative thinking and reflection in order to discover a way in which the conflicting poles can be connected in a solution that benefits both sides, without compromising either of them.

This kind of creative and reflective engagement does not stop at individual decision-making. It also involves recognising the company's position within a larger system. To act meaningfully within the sustainability paradox, companies must operate reflexively and understand that they are not only shaped by the capitalist system that prioritises short-term profit, but that they also help sustain and reproduce that system through the decisions they make and the norms they comply with. Moral responsibility, then, is about more than responding to external pressures. Companies must also critically examine how they contribute to the structures they operate within. Acknowledging this two-way dynamic opens up room for change, both within internal company cultures and practices and at the level of industry norms, stakeholder expectations and regulatory frameworks.

Of course, these efforts for change are difficult to maintain due to their ambition and the fact that profit-driven motivations continue to dominate corporations. This often causes companies that start out with bold promises and enthusiasm to quietly abandon or scale back their sustainability efforts once those goals prove too difficult to achieve and the initial attention fades. However, the fact that initiatives fail or sometimes fall short in practice does not mean they are without value, and this failure should not lead to disengagement or discouragement. When sustainability efforts fail – as they inevitably will at times – companies should avoid becoming defensive or abandoning their commitments altogether. Instead, these setbacks should be viewed as opportunities to reflect, adjust and renew their dedication to responsible practices. This is crucial, because if failure automatically undermines a company's credibility, then there is no room for experimentation in the industry, which leads to isomorphism and the return of superficial solutions. Therefore, if CSR wants to achieve radical change, it should be based on an open acceptance of mistakes, under the condition that companies remain committed to improvement. Only when companies feel safe to acknowledge and learn from their mistakes can responsibility become a process of growth instead of performance. When companies are held accountable while maintaining the opportunity to adjust their approaches based on what went wrong, this signals to both their stakeholders and the rest of the industry that sustainability is not perfect from the start, but an evolving process that requires persistence, openness and continuous effort for improvement.

Thus, from this chapter it becomes clear that to meaningfully address the fast fashion industry's social and ecological harms, its foundational logic that drives its corporate decisions also needs to be changed, as otherwise, the pattern of waste colonialism and systematic exploitation will continue. Eabrasu's moral pluralism and Hahn et al.'s integrative approach offer a way forward by not claiming to solve the corporate sustainability paradox, but staying within its contradictions and reflecting on them to find ways to bring the contrasting concerns together without flattening their complexity. In this light, the path toward a more morally responsible fast fashion industry does not lie in universal solutions or perfect CSR, but in the development of moral agency and the cultivation of open conversations and self-reflection within the industry, so fast fashion corporations become intrinsically motivated to act responsibly, even when it is easier not to do so. Responsibility, then, is not the absence of tension, but the commitment to remain within it, take ownership of one's actions and act responsibly to the best of one's ability, even when the system makes that difficult.

Chapter 3
Consumer Detachment and Responsibility in Fast Fashion

3.1 The Dual Status of The Consumer

Contradictions in the fast fashion industry do not only exist in the corporate sustainability paradox; they are also present in the actions and attitudes of consumers, who take on a fundamentally paradoxical position in the system of fast fashion. On the one hand, consumers are pulled into fast fashion's cycles of overconsumption and premature clothing disposal by the industry's manipulative marketing strategies that create artificial desires and generate a feeling of urgency and scarcity, which lead to overconsumption. On the other hand, consumers are not passive objects of manipulation, and instead actively *externalise* harm by overconsuming poorly produced clothes and discarding them prematurely, even though the global structures of second-hand clothing and waste management rely almost exclusively on the appropriation of land, labour and resources of marginalised communities in the Global South. In the words of Serres (2011), this makes fast fashion consumers simultaneously *contaminated* and *contaminating*, subjects and objects of appropriation by contamination.

However, although consumers stand in a double relation to contamination where they are manipulated by systems of power while simultaneously reproducing them, it would be inaccurate to say that this double form of contamination is symmetrical. While the influences that companies place upon consumers are powerful and pervasive, they are not absolute, as they also contain a degree of optionality, resistance and consent. The externalisation of textile waste, by contrast, often imposes undeniable and inescapable harm upon vulnerable communities. This asymmetry between the impact *on* and impact *of* consumers has important implications for the moral status of the consumer. Consumers are neither helpless victims of manipulation nor fully autonomous actors whose morality can be solely defined by their individual actions or intentions. This means that to judge consumers' actions fairly, their position must be understood in terms of the broader structures they are part of. When someone consumes something, they do not interact with that object in isolation; they also enter into a relationship with *its context* which contains others. The others, in fast fashion, can consist of a global network that includes the people who manufactured the garment, the land from which the resources were extracted and the ecosystems and communities to which the item is eventually externalised. Although these relations might not be visible at the moment of consumption, they remain real and relevant. Therefore, even if they transcend the consumer's immediate awareness or control, understandings of consumers' responsibility cannot be disconnected from these relations and the structures they are part of, as consumption is fundamentally *relational*.

The central question that arises, then, is: How and why do fast fashion consumers become detached from the moral and relational consequences of their consumption, and what would it take for consumers to reclaim a sense of responsibility that is fitting to their entanglements in global systems of harm? To explore this, this chapter examines both the mechanisms that produce consumer detachment and the implications that detachment has for consumers' sense of responsibility. First, I analyse the material and symbolic processes through which fast fashion conceals garments' relational and historical contexts, using Walter Benjamin's (1969) concepts of 'aura' and 'phantasmagoria' to illustrate how these artificially produce a sense of distance between consumers and the consequences of their consumption. Following this, I explore how this detachment influences consumers' understanding of themselves as moral subjects, using the concepts of 'ethical abstraction' and Tuck and Yang's (2012) 'settler moves to innocence' to demonstrate how symbolic acts of care, such as donation or conscious consumption, allow complicity to be reframed as responsibility. Finally,

I consider how fast fashion's relations can be taken out of obscurity through the reestablishment of aura, which simultaneously transforms both the garment and the wearer, bringing together the consumer's divided role as both a participant in and a subject of global systems of harm.

3.2 The Consumer as Appropriated: Phantasmagoria and the Loss of Aura

While many different causes for overconsumption in fast fashion can be identified – including the affordability of mass-produced clothes, the shift of advertising from local trend communication to omnipresent digital media, and the use of marketing tactics like psychological and planned obsolescence that prematurely wear down and outdate clothes to stimulate continuous consumption – another relatively underexplored dimension of how ethical detachment is cultivated in contemporary consumer culture is through *phantasmagoria* (Geczy & Karaminas, 2020, p. 601). Walter Benjamin uses the term 'phantasmagoria' to describe how modern capitalism turns objects into elusive, desirable commodities that are detached from their origins and production methods. This concept stems from a form of theatre in which magic lanterns containing candles and concave mirrors were used to project frightening images of demons, ghosts and skeletons onto walls. The lanterns were intentionally kept out of sight, so audiences would be enchanted by the story they saw unfold in front of them without being distracted by how it came about. Benjamin uses this as a metaphor for how consumers are enchanted by the commodities that surround them and the illusion companies sell, without thinking about the broader implications of their consumption.

Benjamin's conception that modern capitalism sells a fantasy is also applicable to the commodities sold in fast fashion: just like the projected images in phantasmagorical theatre appear magically detached from their source, fast fashion consumers are also only presented with the attractive, finished garments in stores or advertisements, and are seduced by the illusion that is presented to them without thinking of where it comes from. The illusion, according to Benjamin, is the fact that consumer culture transforms products into commodities that are no longer experienced as objects with a history, but as contextless images detached from their relations (Benjamin, 1969, p. 13). This act selectively hides the origins, labour and possible suffering that took place during the items' production and only reveals what the company wants the consumer to see. Only in cases when the history of the product makes the garment more appealing to the consumer, such as when it is made of recycled materials or through sustainable production methods, will this element of the garment's history and context be shown and incorporated into the illusion to further enchant the consumer.

More often than not, however, the fast fashion industry actively detaches the clothes it sells from their relational context. According to Benjamin, this leads to the *loss of aura*. Aura, in Benjamin's philosophy, refers to the idea that objects have a unique and elusive identity that they gain through their personal history, continuously evolving context, and their unique place in space and time. Because of this aura, Benjamin argues, objects elicit deep-seated feelings like admiration, reverence or fear, which enables humans to form meaningful relationships with them. Even though aura can never fully be grasped, we can always sense its presence and connect with the object on a deeper level because of it. Therefore, he argues, it is crucial that we do justice to the relationships objects stand in, as these are the pathway to meaningful connections to objects in the world around us (Benjamin, 1969, p. 6).

However, Benjamin posits, in current times, aura is becoming increasingly lost, which lays the groundwork for phantasmagoria. One of the most important causes for this is the fact that under modern capitalism, most objects are no longer created in a unique or purposeful context, but in a highly fragmented production process in which various individuals and machines perform repetitive,

disconnected tasks (Benjamin, 1969, p. 6). On top of the fact that the manufacturers of fast fashion do not instil the clothes they make with meaning in the same way that craftspeople or tailors do – as they often only perform one repetitive task at the assembly line – fast fashion also lacks aura because mass-produced products are often made using the exact same templates and patterns, causing them to lack unique characteristics and diversity. Moreover, the designs of these templates themselves are often also copied from other trends and designers, who, on their part, also reinterpret ideas from the past in a slightly different manner (Egri, 2019, pp. 121–122). This makes fast fashion a copy of a copy, to the point where each following imitation is instilled with less unique presence and meaning than the one before. According to Benjamin, this process causes fast fashion to lose its aura and, therefore, our ability to meaningfully connect with it (Benjamin, 1969, p. 4).

This is very apparent on the level of the consumer. Whereas many people still feel a great admiration for the unique, handmade gowns that models and celebrities wear on runways or red carpets, and are touched by the love and effort that went into the jumper their grandmother hand-knit for them, they usually do not experience this same feeling of awe when they walk through Zara, or even when they look through their own collection of clothes at home. This does not mean that people do not still love the items they see in stores or in their closets, but their relationship with these clothes is vastly different, as these items are perceived as *commodities*. The difference between objects with aura and commodities is that the value of a commodity purely exists in the present, whereas objects with aura gain their value from their unique and evolving context (Geczy & Karaminas, 2020, p. 602).

According to Petra Egri, fast fashion is by definition designed to epitomise this 'perfect moment'. The value and desirability of trends become what they are through their transience and disappearance. The moment fast fashion is taken out of the immediate context that gives it value – the 'now' – its meaning is lost. Egri refers to this as *ephemerality*. Fast fashion uses phantasmagoria and ephemerality as placeholders for the aura that is no longer there, to still provoke a sense of desirability. By continuously stimulating consumers to participate in trends, fast fashion companies encourage a mode of existence in which consumers forget the deeper connections both they themselves and the products they consume have to the world around them, and are stimulated to exist in an artificial present (Egri, 2019, p. 120).

Benjamin, however, warns that solely engaging with the world through such a superficial and fleeting mode of existence has far-reaching implications (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 7–8). When clothes are displayed as perfect, contextless illusions, this does not only stimulate overconsumption, but it also discourages critical thought and risks detaching consumers from any meaningful relation to the products they consume, or any sense of responsibility for what their consumption entails. Since consumers are made not to worry or even think about where their clothes come from and are merely stimulated to enjoy the satisfaction of consumption, they lose the connection and relationship of care that aura creates. Consequently, this risks them growing desensitised to the fast fashion industry's harms and allows them to treat clothes as disposable commodities. The result of people only relating to the world through seductive, decontextualised products, according to Benjamin, is that we become complicit in systems we no longer see. And when we no longer see these systems, we also stop caring about them. Because of this, the obscuring of relations is not a mere neutral hiding of knowledge, but an intentionally produced situation in which the connection between consumers and the systems of care and exploitation they participate in are severed, so the consumer

is left without relational awareness and objection to the harms they perpetuate. For this reason, it is important to examine how detachment affects how consumers come to see themselves as moral subjects in relation to the systems they participate in.

3.3 The Consumer as Appropriating: Ethical Abstraction and the Fragmentation of Moral Responsibility

A central problem in the removal of aura in the age of fast fashion is that it does not merely obscure the histories and relations embedded in garments—it also reshapes how consumers come to understand themselves as moral subjects. As Benjamin (1969, pp. 5–6) argues, when the social, material and historical ties of a garment are stripped away, what remains is a surface-level presentation that offers no invitation to reflect on the broader contexts in which the item exists. In this kind of phantasmagorical display, garments appear as contextless objects of desire that begin and end at the moment of purchase, while the consumer is similarly flattened and decontextualised – detached from the networks of labour, land and waste that have made the garment's existence possible. If the object is seen as an isolated commodity, so too is the act of buying it, which means that no further responsibility or reflection needs to take place beyond the moment of purchase.

In this reframed reality, consumers are encouraged to perceive themselves as detached, neutral actors whose choices occur in a vacuum. The removal of a garment's context thus leads to a second, deeper type of abstraction, in which consumption itself is no longer registers as a relational or consequential act. Instead, it becomes something private, self-contained and devoid of moral complexity, unburdened by the systems of exploitation and environmental harm it sustains. The consumer's relational field is reduced to their immediate field of interaction, enabling them to imagine their participation in fast fashion as isolated and inconsequential. Even when injustices are vaguely acknowledged, responsibility is often deflected onto abstract structures or market forces that seem too large, distant or complex to confront (Joy et al., 2012, p. 280). In this way, consumption becomes an ephemeral, unsubstantial interaction: the consumer remains engaged in the cycle of desire, selection and disposal, yet stays disengaged from the broader consequences that cycle sustains.

Importantly, this detachment does not persist because harm is entirely invisible or unknown. In fact, many consumers are, at least superficially, aware of the exploitative practices behind fast fashion. What sustains this distance instead, is the industry's ability to offer consumers symbolic forms of participation that make them feel like they are already responding to fast fashion's harms, while leaving the deeper structures that produce them intact. Practices like donation, recycling or 'conscious' consumption, for example, are presented as meaningful acts of care, even though they often function as industry-designed responses that maintain the system they appear to challenge. Although many consumers partake in these actions with genuine intentions, they also serve to individualise responsibility and redirect moral concern away from the structural issues of overproduction, overconsumption and global inequality. These accessible and low-effort gestures make it possible for consumers to feel responsible without tackling the root causes, which allows the industry's operational model to remain largely unquestioned, while feelings of guilt and worry are absolved and redirected.

Tuck and Yang (2012) refer to such symbolic acts of care as 'settler moves to innocence': strategies that allow individuals to benefit from systems of structural injustice, while simultaneously preserving their moral self-image by alleviating guilt, without disrupting the structures of harm that sustain their

privilege and convenience. In the context of fast fashion, not all expressions of concern classify as settler moves to innocence, but those that frame symbolic acts of care as sufficient while leaving complicity unaddressed, often do. For example, buying fast fashion with a 'green' label may make the consumer feel better about their consumption, but it does not require them to give up their convenience, privilege or consumption habits – or change much at all. These moves offer resolution without transformation: they protect the consumer's self-image, but not those most impacted by fast fashion's harm.

This dynamic is especially visible in the practice of second-hand clothing donation, which is often presented as a sustainable and philanthropic solution to overconsumption. Although donation seems to be an effective means to give unwanted garments a new home, in practice, only 10 to 30 percent of all donated textiles are resold in local charity stores or redistributed to the intended communities. The remainder is externalised to the Global South, where it overwhelms local textile markets or is incinerated, landfilled or dumped in marginalised neighbourhoods or local environments (Franklin-Wallis, 2023). According to Max Liboiron, who builds on Tuck and Yang, such practices exemplify *benevolent colonialism*: they reframe participation in extractive systems as generosity, which allows consumers to feel positive about themselves – not because harm or unsustainability is avoided, but because it is reframed as aid (Liboiron, 2021, p. 6).

The framing of donation as charity is deeply connected to the colonial histories that continue to shape global power dynamics, as discussed in Chapter 1. English literature and culture scholar Andrzej Diniejko (2010) identifies this framing as part of the *rhetoric of benevolence*: a colonial narrative that justifies interventions in marginalised peoples' lives and affairs as acts of care or moral responsibility, regardless of whether these interventions are wanted or helpful. This framing is built on the assumption that non-Western societies are in need of external help and economic intervention – a premise that, according to Diniejko, relies entirely on the suppression of the recipient's agency. To justify care as a motivation for intervention, the dominant group first has to construct the recipient as incapable of caring for themselves. Once this framing is in place, the wants and needs of the receiving population can be disregarded, bypassed or undermined based on the idea that the Western nation's intervention is in the best interests of the dominated group. In the context of fast fashion, this dynamic allows consumers to treat the donation of unwanted clothes as a virtuous act, rather than as exploitation. Even as consumers participate in what is effectively a global redistribution of waste, the narrative of benevolence shields them from accountability and stabilises their privilege (Harris, 2022).

The issue thus lies not merely in what consumers know or do not know, but also in how the system frames them as isolated individuals whose moral responsibility is confined to immediate, visible consequences, while purposely keeping their deeper entanglement in the structural conditions that make their privilege possible out of the picture. For example, Western nations and corporations benefit from framing donation as aid, because exporting second-hand textiles is cheaper than dealing with the costs and complexities of recycling and domestic landfill management, making it more convenient to offload the problem elsewhere. Disposing of hazardous waste, for example, can cost up to $2000 per tonne in Western countries, whereas it only costs $40 in certain African nations, making the continuation of donation an attractive option (Koné, 2012, p. 4). However, the misrepresentation of donation as aid makes consumers' own role within these broader structures of harm increasingly difficult to recognise and therefore complicates their ability to critically engage with and confront the systems that perpetuate them. In this way, fast fashion does not only erase the histories of garments; it also strips the consumer of context, relationality, and, consequently, the critical awareness necessary to challenge structural harm.

Still, this constructed detachment does not absolve consumers of responsibility, because, as Liboiron emphasises, to act within systems of harm is to be non-innocent – not because individual consumers will for harm to take place, but because their participation in fast fashion drives it (Liboiron, 2021, p. 22). Without consumers' continuous purchasing of new clothes, the industry's model of consistent overproduction could not persist. Responsibility, then, must be understood as a call to acknowledge and act upon one's embeddedness in systems of exploitation and care.

To take this obligation seriously, consumers must undergo a conceptual shift and realise that consumption does not occur in isolation. To consume is to participate in a network of relations that includes supply chains, manufacturers, ecosystems and the lives of others. A responsible consumer, therefore, is not one who participates in settler moves to innocence, but one who recognises their position in these broader systems and seeks to transform them. Moral detachment is not a natural consequence of the complexity of fast fashion, but an intentionally cultivated condition that must be unlearned. This means that reclaiming responsibility begins with restoring relation, as from this, the possibility of genuine change arises.

3.4 Reestablishing Aura and Restoring Obscured Relations

If phantasmagoria works to obscure the relational and historical ties of garments and, by extension, to position the consumer as disconnected, then reclaiming responsibility must also be the task of restoring aura. Benjamin's concept of aura offers more than a critique of modern consumerism; it also provides a philosophical framework for resisting capitalist detachment and for re-embedding meaning, care and responsibility within consumers' actions. When aura is not understood as a quality that is solely dependent on how the object is produced, but as something that emerges from relational embeddedness, it becomes possible to imagine a restoration of aura in fashion that does not require returning to an idealised past of artisanal production, but that can instead be based on cultivating new forms of meaning in consumption itself. This means that although fast fashion may still be produced in an industrial production process that lacks uniqueness and obscures relations, consumers can learn to reintroduce aura through how they choose to engage with and relate to their garments. In this view, aura is interpreted not as a lost property of an object, but as a future-oriented practice: an active effort to reintegrate garments into meaningful networks of relation through the consumer's own decisions and actions.

Practices like mending, repairing, tailoring and long-term use are central to this reestablishment of aura, as these acts allow clothes to accumulate personal stories, which transforms them from mass-produced commodities whose meaning is lost with the introduction of a new trend into objects that have a unique, individual identity and meaning. In such a context, a stitched seam or taken-in hem are not viewed as defects but as signs of maintenance and care, which signal a sustained relationship between the wearer and the garment (McCorkill, 2021, p. 1). The use of the word 'wearer' instead of 'consumer' is intentional here, as this process of care does not only impact the garment, but also reconnects the owner to their clothes. To reestablish aura is to restore the relation between humans and objects and to reintegrate oneself into a material and moral relationship with them. By mending and tailoring clothes, the wearer invests time and labour into the garment, causing them to no longer be a passive consumer of trends, but an active participant in the garment's life that imbues it with meaning and history through continued use and attention. From this perspective, care is not merely an alternative to disposability, but its philosophical opposite. Where disposability depends on erasure, anonymity and replacement, care insists on continuation, memory and responsibility.

This orientation closely aligns with the values of slow fashion, which emphasises quality over quantity and encourages consumers to buy sustainably (Jung & Jin, 2014, pp. 510–511). Instead of contrasting the speed of fast fashion, 'slow' in this context refers to a philosophical attentiveness and intentionality that takes the social and environmental impact of clothing production into account (Joy et al., 2012, p. 289). Slow fashion can be interpreted as a means to restore aura: it is a reorientation toward time, relation and responsibility that goes against the capitalist norms of urgency, novelty and disposability and invites consumers to focus on care, meaning and durability instead. It asks consumers to change what they buy and reflect on what their choices sustain. In slowing down, consumers gain the opportunity to cultivate relationships that grow deeper over time, allowing aura to emerge. Slow fashion thus becomes a deliberate interruption of fast fashion's phantasmagoria, in the sense that it *does* pay attention to the source of the illusion.

Another powerful way to restore obscured relations is through making garments' histories visible and knowable by embedding them within narrative. Storytelling through origin tags, digital traceability or word-of-mouth reintroduces garments as objects with context, making their histories and relations perceptible again. By revealing where a garment's materials come from or under what conditions it was made, these narratives help reconnect consumers to the people, places and processes involved in its production, transforming what might otherwise appear as a disconnected commodity into a relational object. This is not sentimentality, but a form of ethical recall: a means for restoring the garment's embeddedness in global networks. By making these histories visible and knowable, narrative embedding counters the phantasmagorical detachment of fast fashion and invites the wearer into more informed and responsible forms of consumption.

The method of design-for-repair strengthens this perspective by integrating future care and responsibility into the garment itself. When features like spare buttons, reinforced seams and customisable or adaptable elements are incorporated into the garment itself, designers signal that the item is meant to be repaired, not discarded. This method directly challenges fast fashion's logic of planned obsolescence, where durability is viewed as a threat or even a 'kiss of death', because long-lasting garments reduce the need for replacements and undermine the rapid turnover on which the industry depends (Joy et al., 2012, p. 288). In contrast, design-for-repair positions the garment's owner as a co-creator who is responsible for its continued life and the relationships it carries. Here, the reestablishment of aura is not merely symbolic but also materially supported through the garment's very construction, which invites the wearer to sustain a relationship with it over time. This transforms the act of wearing into a commitment and ongoing responsibility (Niinimäki & Durrani, 2020, pp. 155, 160).

Finally, thrifting also serves as a way in which consumers can resist the methods of fast fashion, as it plays a crucial role in extending the lifecycle of garments by reimagining clothing as something to be passed on, rediscovered and revalued over time. In allowing garments to enter new contexts and homes, thrifting enables clothing to accumulate layered meanings and aura: they carry the memory of their previous owner while still allowing room for new modes of expression. In this way, thrifting goes against disposability and is both a sustainable and relational choice that repositions consumption as continuation instead of replacement.

Still, although each of these strategies provides a meaningful possibility for restoring aura, it is important to acknowledge their shared limitation: almost all of them take place after the harm of production has already occurred and the damage has been done. While thrifting, mending, and narrative embedding are crucial to countering the harms of the fast fashion industry, they do not undo the exploitative labour and environmental degradation that are already embedded in many garments. As such, without broader structural change, they risk becoming ways of making damaged

systems more tolerable, rather than structurally transforming them. Even slow fashion has the potential to reproduce consumerism and inequality when framed as an exclusive niche rather than as a broader cultural rejection of overproduction and disposability. The risk, then, is to mistake these practices for systemic solutions. Without addressing the core drivers of mass production and consumption, these strategies can remain insufficient for real change.

Restoring aura in fast fashion therefore requires both retrospection and reorientation. It is a future-oriented project aimed at giving existing garments meaning and history, but also a critical stance against the conditions that stripped them of meaning in the first place. This makes challenging overproduction and confronting the erasure of relationality part of the same project. While this requires shifts in attitude and action at the level of the consumer, it also necessitates a collective confrontation of the structures and parties that intentionally erase relationality for their own benefit. To undo the detachment this causes, relational visibility must be actively reconstructed. Public awareness campaigns, mandatory garment labelling and digital supply chain transparency can all contribute to re-establishing the visibility of relations that fast fashion has obscured. Consumers must be equipped to not only ask where their clothes come from, but to demand systems that do not obscure such knowledge in the first place. Only when consumers are able to realise their entanglement in global networks can they learn to act meaningfully within them.

Reestablishing aura, then, is not nostalgia for a lost authenticity or a radical return to manual production. It is an act of re-contextualisation that restores visibility of what has been hidden or erased. It means recognising the presence of others – whether that be workers, ecosystems or future wearers – within the garment and recognising oneself as being in relation with them. When garments are allowed to accumulate care, repair and use over time, they resist being reduced to ephemeral commodities, as they are related to not as disposable trends, but as valuable objects that exist in networks of labour, land and culture. In this way, the restoration of aura simultaneously becomes a method for restoring the self: it brings back the garment's embeddedness, and through this, the consumer's capacity to care, act and respond. To take responsibility, then, is to reject the narratives that frame complicity as invisible and care as optional. It is to recognise that moral detachment is not merely a by-product of consumer culture or an individual shortcoming of the consumer, but a carefully maintained condition that depends on remaining obscured. The restoration of aura is a reminder that to consume is never to act alone – and in that recognition, the possibility of a morally reimagined consumer who is capable of awareness, resistance and responsibility begins to emerge.

Chapter 4
Re-grounding Relational Responsibility: Ontology, Culture and the Violence of Waste

4.1 Reframing Responsibility Through Relation

The previous chapter concluded with an unresolved tension. Although practices like repair, thrifting and slow fashion offer partial forms of resistance by pushing back against fast fashion's culture of disposability and detachment, they remain structurally constrained. While they may slow the circulation of waste and re-instil care into consumption, they cannot undo the violence of overproduction or the colonial legacies and economic dependencies that perpetuate waste colonialism. These practices still operate within a system that discourages care, rewards detachment and either individualises or outsources responsibility. From this, it becomes clear that responsibility cannot be fully restored through such actions alone – not while the deeper structures that sustain irresponsibility in fashion remain intact. The underlying problem remains that the very ontological and material conditions necessary for care, such as relationality, time, support, and respect continue to be structurally compromised by systems that incentivise separation, speed and disposability.

To move forward, this chapter starts by returning to a question raised in Chapter 1: how has it become possible that some lives are structurally protected from the harms of waste, while others are consistently exposed to its consequences? That chapter explored how Enlightenment ideals established an exclusionary moral order. Within this framework, to be recognised as fully human and worthy of protection required embodying the traits of rational self-governance and disconnection from materiality. Those who diverged from this norm were portrayed as its opposite: irrational and marginalised – visible when needed for labour or use, but ignored as lives worthy of structural care and protection.

The chapters that followed have demonstrated that this logic extends beyond theory into practice, particularly in the fast fashion industry which externalises harm, uses responsibility for greenwashing and displaces textiles under the guise of donation. Whether expressed through CSR or symbolic acts of ethical consumption, the result is that care becomes abstract and responsibility is offloaded, causing harm to remain invisible. Even in cases where genuine concern persists, making a change is difficult, because the conditions to enact that care have been dismantled by structures that determine how waste is distributed and whose lives are treated as disposable without consequence. The problem thus does not solely lie in intention, but in a system based on self-interest and exclusion that profits from obscuring relations and disconnecting action from consequence.

Therefore, addressing this problem requires more than mere calls for recognition or inclusion or the celebration of individual acts of resistance. Although these acts are important, Da Silva reminds us that the very concept of recognition itself often remains structured by the colonial legacies it is meant to overcome. Thus, while broadening the circle of inclusion may seem like progress, it leaves intact the underlying structure that authorises that inclusion in the first place. When inclusion is still granted by the West, it merely extends a frame that remains defined by separation and inequality. The goal, then, should not be to invite more people into a flawed system of recognition, but to rethink the dualist and separatist system that defines who counts in the first place. The questions we must ask, then, are: How does waste become thinkable? How do certain lives and environments come to be treated as acceptable dumping grounds? And what would it mean to rebuild these relations that have been harmed?

To think through these questions, this chapter turns to the work of Vanessa Watts (2013) and Polycarp Ikuenobe (2014) – not to romanticise or exploit Indigenous and African cosmologies as 'solutions', but to learn from ontological frameworks that have been displaced by colonialism and waste colonialism. Watts, writing from Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe traditions, shows how colonialism inflicts ontological violence onto Indigenous cultures by imposing Western dualism and forcibly disconnecting place from thought, land from agency and being from relation. Ikuenobe, working from African philosophical traditions, shows how colonial imposition destabilises the everyday cultural practices through which relational, communal forms of responsibility are enacted, supplanting traditional values and stripping them of the material and social conditions they require to survive. Their perspectives do not provide quick fixes for 'solving' waste colonialism. Rather, they offer a different orientation for understanding being, care and accountability.

Where Enlightenment traditions tend to detach reason from place and materiality, and separate ethics from relation, Watts and Ikuenobe start from embeddedness. From their perspectives, knowledge is situated, care is reciprocal and responsibility is a shared condition instead of an individual burden. Integrating their work into the discussion of waste colonialism enables a fundamental shift in perspective, as it allows us to see that waste colonialism is not simply an economic or environmental crisis, but a relational and ontological one, too, as it relies on the denial of ontological and cultural connections between beings, places and actions that make meaningful responsibility possible.

Important in this matter is that these ideas are not stories or metaphors; they are lived. The Kantamanto Market in Accra, which remains central to this thesis, is a place where these questions come alive. It is not just a place where textile waste is exported to; it is also a space where alternative ways of relating to materials persist and are enacted, even under the pressures of fast fashion's waste colonialism. In spite of the harm the Global North inflicts on Ghanaians, values of care, repair and reciprocity persist. In the face of this tension, the final question becomes: how can these values and practices be structurally supported and sustained on their own terms and not just as a remedy for systems that evade responsibility?

This chapter ultimately does not seek to conclusively solve waste colonialism, but how to reconstruct the social, material and ontological conditions that make responsibility liveable against it. It turns to Watts and Ikuenobe to examine what has been dislocated in the shift to capitalist, extractive, waste-producing modes of life, and to begin tracing how responsibility might be re-grounded in relation. From this perspective, care and repair must move beyond being surface-level fixes performed under pressure; they must be made possible as meaningful, supported expressions of relational responsibility. Rethinking responsibility thus requires more than intent; it begins with the slow work of rebuilding the relations that have been severed by the West.

4.2 Waste Colonialism as Ontological and Cultural Violence

If waste colonialism does not merely disrupt land and livelihoods, but disorients the very foundations of moral and relational life, then any meaningful resistance must begin with rethinking how being, relation and responsibility are structured in the first place. The question is not just what waste does to land or people, but how waste becomes thinkable and how entire systems come to treat land as inert, care as irrational, and responsibility as hyper-individualised or displaced. In this context, Vanessa Watts, an Indigenous theorist of Mohawk and Anishinaabe descent, becomes important, as her thought directs attention to the ontological conditions under which such harm becomes possible. If a system can treat land as a dump and extract from it without consequence, this indicates that the

very idea of *what counts as a being* has been narrowed to exclude land and other actants that are often considered inanimate in Western frameworks. Thus, what must be contested here is not merely environmental policy or economic injustice, but the very frameworks that determine who and what counts as capable of meaning, agency and relation. For Watts, the resistance of waste colonialism must therefore start with ontology and the stories we tell about who and what participates in being.

In Watts' account, responsibility, subjectivity and knowledge do not emerge through separation or abstraction, but are always already embedded in and emergent from the entangled relations between humans, land and more-than-human life. Central to her work is the concept of *Place-Thought*, which she describes as a worldview in which place and thought are not distinct, but mutually constitutive.[3] More specifically, she writes, "Place-Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated" (Watts, 2013, p. 21). Land, in this view, is not passive matter, but a living, thinking presence in which both humans and non-humans are relationally embedded, and from which they gain their agency.

While the cosmology of Place-Thought specifically belongs to Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe traditions, its value in the context of this thesis does not lie in using it to make a universal claim about all Indigenous or traditional worldviews. Rather, it serves as a conceptual lens that illustrates a principle that is shared by many land-based ontologies, of which Place-Thought is an example, namely that relation, rather than separation, is fundamental to existence, and that land is not a passive background to act upon but an active, animate participant in life. The function of Place-Thought in this chapter is not to conflate or generalise across different traditions and cosmologies, but to expose the violence done to them when these relational foundations are denied by the imposition of Western structures. When Watts speaks of Place-Thought, she offers a language to articulate how colonial systems enact a form of ontological violence that does not only displace and deny people their agency – as has been shown by Da Silva – but that also displaces the grounds on which their understandings of meaning, care and being are built. This becomes most evident in the logic of Western modernity, which entrenches the strict dualisms between mind and body, nature and culture, and spirit and matter, which consequently allow land and non-human – including non-Euro-white – life to be transformed into extractable, disposable resources.

Important in this matter is that this Western worldview was not left to co-exist as separate from or parallel to other cosmologies, but that it was imposed onto them as the only legitimate way of understanding reality. In doing so, it worked not only to dominate, but also overwrite alternative worldviews: it rendered these different ways of being in and with the world unintelligible.

Watts considers this supplantation not simply as a conflict between worldviews, but as a fundamental ontological distortion. It does not just impose a different understanding of the world; it actively dismantles the relational foundations through which being, meaning and responsibility are constituted in land-based cosmologies. In Euro-modern frameworks, the autonomous subject is the bearer of reason precisely because of its detachment from land and kin. In Place-Thought, by contrast, agency can only arise through situated relations. Because of this, for Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee communities, the claim that land is animate and therefore capable of reflection, desire and will is not symbolic, but ontological. Being does not exist prior to or apart from relation; it is formed within it (Watts, 2013, p. 23).

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[3] I do not reference Place-Thought (or any other traditional or Indigenous cosmologies) as a concept to be extracted and repurposed within Euro-Western frameworks, but to emphasise that relationality is already a lived reality for many Indigenous peoples in connection to their lands. My intention is to confront the colonial structures that have destabilised these relations, not to extract or appropriate them as convenient 'solutions'.

From this perspective, the disruption of relational ontologies is not an indirect or accidental consequence of colonialism – it is foundational to it. The treatment of land as lifeless devalues it and simultaneously undermines its role in the creation of meaning, orientation and obligation. Because land is an active participant in the shaping of life, including ethical life, in Indigenous cosmologies, silencing this agency makes the world incapable of responding and consequently shuts down the possibility of their relational understanding of both life and responsibility.[4] In waste colonialism, this ontological violence is extended even further, as colonialism has not merely denied the land's agency, but also physically buries it under waste. When treated as a dumping ground, the possibility of relational responsibility becomes impossible, as people cannot orient themselves relationally when the ground that once oriented them can no longer think with them. Consequently, what was once an active participant in ethical life is now overwritten by systems that impair Indigenous understandings of care.

It is precisely at this point that the philosophy of Polycarp Ikuenobe becomes important. Whereas Watts illustrates the ontological violence brought on by Western colonialism, Ikuenobe shows the cultural implications this violence has, as it fractures the everyday practices through which responsibility is enacted. According to Ikuenobe, in the imposition of the Western worldview onto Indigenous cosmologies, colonialism does not simply replace one set of institutions with another. Rather, it imposes Euro-modern conceptions like Christianity, capitalism, Western science and industrialisation onto other cultures as if they are universally applicable, context-independent and seamlessly transferrable. However, this assumption is exactly what relational cosmologies reject: in these frameworks, knowledge, responsibility, and care are not detachable, but emerge from specific cosmological entanglements, making them non-transferrable without displacing them and what is already there. As such, extracting them from one relational order to another is nonsensical, as it dissolves the basis on which meaning is built (Ikuenobe, 2014, p. 13).

Still, Ikuenobe argues, this is exactly what colonialism does. This results in the creation of *hybrid cultures* in which elements of the traditional worldview remain, but are forced to function within structures that undermine or contradict them. In such contexts, people become culturally disoriented, as colonised communities are no longer able to fully maintain their ancestral traditions, yet are also unable to fully adapt to the systems imposed upon them, since they are so different from their own. People continue to hold values of relational care and responsibility, but have to act upon them within a system that denies the relations upon which they depend. Consequently, the coherence of moral and cultural life is destabilised – not because traditional values are lost, but because the foundation on which those values are predicated has been compromised (Ikuenobe, 2014, p. 14).

4.3 From Refusal to Reconstruction: The Ethics of Repair at Kantamanto

The situation at Kantamanto exemplifies these different yet intersecting harms. It is a place where Watts' ontological critique and Ikuenobe's cultural analysis come together. The people of Accra are both overwhelmed and disoriented by the enormous influx of textile waste. Ghana, like many African societies – and somewhat similar to Place-Thought – holds a longstanding culture of conservation and repair, which is based on the belief that everything that exists is owed care. When the second-hand

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[4] Concrete steps against this Western structuring are already being taken, such as through the recognition of New Zealand's Whanganui River as a legal person in 2017. This reflects Māori beliefs that the river is a living ancestor that must be approached as such, and not as a resource to be managed or owned. Harming the river now legally equals harming the tribe, as they are one and the same (Ainge Roy, 2017).

clothing trade at Kantamanto was first set up, it strongly reflected this traditional ethic of care, as it was not just a place where second-hand clothes were resold, but also a space where thousands of vendors, tailors, dyers and upcyclers worked to repair, re-dye, alter and repurpose incoming clothes to extend their lifespan. Instead of treating garments as disposable, workers at the Kantamanto were able to sustain a culture in which garments were treated as intrinsically valuable and did their best to give them a new life – not just out of economic necessity, but also because it is in line with their traditional belief that humans need to take care of the relations they have to the material and spiritual world (Ikuenobe, 2014, pp. 2–3; Franklin-Wallis, 2023).

However, as Ikuenobe emphasises, when traditional ethics are forced to operate within extractive structures, they become structurally distorted. Although many people at Kantamanto remain deeply committed to practices of repair and reuse, their ability to uphold these values is becoming increasingly difficult. The overwhelming amounts of second-hand clothes exported by the Global North, combined with the limited infrastructure to manage these textiles and the monetary bounds many Ghanaians are in have made it impossible to maintain these labour-intensive practices at the necessary scale. Moreover, the supply far outpaces the demand, which leaves many garments with no possible future use or home. As a result, many clothes that would have once been repaired or resold are now being discarded – not because Ghanaians have abandoned their traditional values of conservation and repair, but because the conditions for practising them have been stripped away.

Still, the response from Kantamanto's community has not been to give up their practices of care in the face of waste colonialism, but a layered insistence on their continuance. Practices of repair, redistribution and collective risk-sharing continue for multiple reasons. On one hand, they are necessary: with bales of increasingly poor-quality clothes arriving daily, repair and upcycling are often the only ways to make garments sellable at all. For many people working at Kantamanto, it is the only available means of income. On the other hand, however, these same practices still stem from a deeper ethic of care. Against disposability, they refuse to treat textiles as waste and insist that matter carries obligations with it, and that land, even when it is overwhelmed by clothes, still demands care. Initiatives like *The Revival* illustrate this, as they partner with Kantamanto's seamsters, dyers and cobblers to turn unsellable garments into quilts, backpacks and streetwear. "It's here already; we might as well make it functional," Yayra, the founder of the initiative, explains (Franklin-Wallis, 2023). This makes repair both a means to survive and an ontological commitment to the longstanding cultural values of conservation and repair, which simultaneously refuse the Euro-modern throwaway culture. In this sense, Kantamanto's care is a form of endurance that continues a different relation to matter, value and responsibility.

However, this endurance is simultaneously compounded by another problem: Ghanaian care is appropriated and exploited by the parties that created the problem and that benefit from its continuance. As the head of Accra's waste management department puts it: "We are being used as a dumping ground for the white man's textile waste. The little money we have to manage our own refuse, we're forced to spend cleaning up yours," (Ashton, 2023). Still, while Ghanaians are forced to finance and manage the consequences of a problem they did not cause, the Global North often points to Accra's repair practices as proof that the export of second-hand clothing is working, and as evidence that donated clothes *are* given a new life by people who care for them. But this covers up the fact that this care is being performed under coercive circumstances, without adequate time, resources or support. Essentially, Ghanaians are forced to repair to survive, while their labour is used to stabilise a trade that undermines the principles of relational responsibility. A major problem of waste colonialism in fast fashion thus lies in the way care is exploited and organised under imposed pressure. The question, then, is not *whether* care endures, because it demonstrably does, but *how* it

can endure without making those who practise it pay the highest price for it. In other words, how can care be made possible not as an act of resistance against the system, but as a practice that is genuinely supported by a world that recognises and affirms the relational principles on which it depends?

The community of Kantamanto responds to this question with a clear call for change. They do not ask for the end of the second-hand clothing trade, as they acknowledge their livelihoods are dependent on it, but they strongly reject the terms under which it currently operates (Logan, 2023). What they demand is a restructured system in which fewer, higher-quality garments are exported and in which laws and policies are set into place that make producers and exporters accountable for the waste they offload. Moreover, they propose targeted bans on the import of clothes of certain materials like polyester, which is difficult to recycle and often used in fast fashion (Bastmeijer, 2024, p. 3). They also call for mandatory Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programmes – which are currently still voluntary in most countries – that oblige brands to cover the full cost of managing their garments from the beginning until their end-of-life stage, including the collection, sorting and recycling of textiles in the Global South, where most of those garments ultimately end up (Chan, 2022). Recent voluntary agreements like the five-year, $50 million agreement between ultra-fast fashion company Shein and Ghana's Or Foundation suggest some progress is being made, but also once again highlight the underlying issue: without enforceable regulations, these deals risk functioning as positive PR for the company and as mere band-aids for Ghana. The fund is substantial enough to attract Western media's attention, but far too small to truly address the scale of the harm, especially when Shein continues its pattern of extreme overproduction (Ashton, 2023).

This is precisely the gap that Kantamanto's demands aim to confront. Their proposals are not appeals for inclusion within existing models of circularity, but a call to reshape the conditions under which circularity becomes meaningful. Kantamanto shows that repair – of garments and the global system that devalues them – cannot be reduced to technical fixes or individual responsibility alone. It requires the reconstruction of relationality and supporting interdependent ontologies where they already exist. This means addressing the symptoms of waste and the deeper logics of separability, disembeddedness and disposability that produce it. In doing so, Indigenous and traditional ontologies must not be instrumentalised or unquestioningly translated into Western frameworks, as this would be co-option or appropriation for Western use, but supported on their own terms. That includes supporting the revitalisation of land as animate and deserving of respect; building institutions that enable relational responsibility without distorting its meaning; and reorienting ethics away from extraction toward reciprocity. This is a structural commitment to making space for ways of life that colonialism has denied, in which the path forward is not imagined as the scaling up of repair as a fix, but as an effort to rebuild the relational grounds that make repair intrinsically matter.

True responsibility for waste colonialism thus goes beyond superficial reforms and reducing garment exports. It requires rejecting the systems that expose marginalised lives and that make their exploitation invisible. This means recognising that the inequalities Kantamanto confronts are ontological: embedded into the ways value, agency and obligation are assigned and recognised. Responsibility, in this context, cannot be reduced to a checklist of tasks assigned to consumers, corporations and governments. It is not a sum of parts, but a relational condition of interdependence. Its meaning lies in whether action is situated within systems that support care, ensure accountability and extend recognition equally, rather than coercion and depletion. Kantamanto reveals both the persistence of care under pressure, and the costs of demanding those with the least resources to provide it. The challenge now is to ensure that responsibility – whether from individuals, businesses or governments – is no longer treated as charity or a branding, but as a collective, systemic

obligation. To repair the damage of waste colonialism is to refuse its terms entirely: to rebuild the foundations on which responsibility can become relational, sustainable and just.

Conclusion

This thesis opened with the dissonance between the overwhelming scale and impact of waste colonialism, and the lack of moral, political and philosophical urgency with which it is addressed. It asked how the logics underlying dominant Western philosophical, economic and consumer frameworks contribute to the conditions that make waste colonialism possible – particularly in how harm is distributed, responsibility is selectively denied and certain lives are positioned as expendable. And it asked, just as urgently, what it would take to rebuild the conditions under which responsibility can be understood and practiced as a shared, relational obligation, rather than a selectively chosen one. At stake in these questions are the systems of thought, power and valuation that make the unequal distribution of waste appear acceptable, or even justified.

One of the main insights that developed is that harm from waste – but also in general – is not only unevenly distributed, but also unevenly recognised. Flows of harm and waste do not accidentally end up in places like Ghana – they often follow colonial routes and ideas regarding whose suffering counts and whose can be disregarded. These patterns have deep historical roots in Euro-modern Enlightenment ideas that defined subjectivity through rational autonomy and excluded those who failed to meet its Eurocentric standards. These hierarchies of visibility still play a role in which lives are protected, and whose calls for help can be selectively ignored. The fast fashion industry reinforces this logic by structuring production and waste disposal around the pursuit of economic growth, while externalising social and environmental costs onto those with the least power and resources to resist. At the same time, consumers are both positioned as victims and perpetrators of appropriation by contamination – they are made to feel responsible through symbolic acts of care, while being intentionally shielded from the deeper implications of their consumption through narratives of charity and conscious consumption.

These dynamics do not operate independently, but reinforce each other. Dualist, Euro-modern notions of separateness lay the groundwork for modern capitalism's instrumental drives toward extraction and exploitation, which on their turn influence the intentional phantasmagorical disconnection and loss of aura that keep overconsumption and consumer detachment intact. Together, these overlapping frameworks create an environment in which responsibility becomes fragmented and conditional, making it something that can be performed superficially or symbolically, and can be continuously deferred.

In contrast, the practices at Kantamanto offer a fundamentally different orientation toward responsibility. Here, it is not an abstract moral principle, but a concrete and lived reality that is enacted through care, intentionality, repair and the ongoing acknowledgement of interconnection. The community of Kantamanto responds to discarded textiles by investing time, effort and labour into mending, upcycling, redyeing and reselling them. Their attitude is one of creativity and persistence. While their care is often co-opted and used as 'proof' of the benevolence of donation, Kantamanto's ethics does not lose its meaning and persists on its own terms. In fact, its practices actively counter the Western logic of disposability by demonstrating that value can exist beyond newness, and that aura can be reestablished in fast fashion. Kantamanto's community shows that care can exist even when resources are limited, and that responsibility, when grounded in relation, can still emerge under pressure. What comes into view is a form of responsibility that is not abstract or symbolic, but relational, all-encompassing and shared.

This leads to several key conclusions. First, responsibility must be understood as relational. It does not arise in isolation, but within the broader political, economic, historical and cultural contexts that structure action. Consumers, companies and policymakers do not make decisions in a vacuum; they

act within systems that distribute power unevenly and determine what is visible. Individual responsibility still matters, but it cannot be meaningfully understood or practised without also recognising how it is conditioned by overarching norms and power structures. Without that awareness, responsibility risks becoming incomplete, as it remains partial and unreflective to the contexts that influence how it takes shape.

Second, responding to waste colonialism requires more than reacting to its visible effects. Stricter regulations, bans on unsellable textiles and CSR policies are necessary and important for change, but they are insufficient if they leave the underlying logics of exclusion, instrumentalism and disposability intact. Action must be based not just on the knowledge that something is wrong, but in an understanding of what makes the existence and continuance of that problem possible in the first place. The fact that textile dumping continues in spite of existing policies is not a sign that the system has failed; it shows that the system is working exactly as intended. Without confronting the values and hierarchies that allow harm to be displaced without consequence, change will remain superficial and the problem will persist.

Third, responsibility must be reclaimed from its appropriation and instrumentalisation by those who benefit from the continuation of unequal waste distribution. Within fast fashion, terms like 'sustainability', 'impact' and 'circularity' are often used to present an image of social and environmental awareness, while leaving the underlying structures of exploitation untouched. In this framing, responsibility risks becoming performative to display, rather than practise based on intrinsic beliefs. If responsibility is to hold any weight, it must do more than simply naming injustice. It must involve a refusal to uncritically comply with the systems that produce it, and a commitment to working toward genuine improvement.

What binds these conclusions together, is the understanding that if responsibility is to become meaningful in addressing waste colonialism, the underlying structures of disposability, exclusion and instrumentalism must be addressed. Responsibility must be redefined as something that is owed not based on proximity or similarity, but on shared existence in an interconnected world. Responsibility, in this light, is both collective and reparative – not as a reaction to harm, but a way of rebuilding the foundations on which care, recognition and relation can become viable again.

Where, then, do we go from here? Waste colonialism teaches us that harm does not disappear when it is displaced. Instead, it accumulates along coastlines, in marketplaces and in the living spaces of those already most affected by global asymmetries. Responding to it therefore requires more than acknowledging that there is a problem. It begins with refusing the narratives that frame waste as neutral, inevitable or apolitical. It demands the confrontation of economic and political agreements that allow waste to be externalised without consequence. It requires rethinking trade, reevaluating who holds the decision-making power and why, and amplifying the voices, knowledges and ontologies of those who have long been denied authority and autonomy. And it calls for the cultivation of practices of material, conceptual and ethical repair in a world structured around disposability. Responsibility begins where disposability ends: in recognising that no life, no labour, and no landscape exists outside the boundaries of moral concern.

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