
From Possessive Individualism to Civic Virtue Environmentalism: Virtue, Community, and the Moral Foundations of Environmental Responsibility

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Abstract

This thesis develops a systematic critique of liberal conceptions of the self and their implications for environmental ethics, arguing for a shift towards a civic virtue environmentalism grounded in a situated conception of the person and community. It begins from the empirical observation that, although citizens in liberal democracies often express concern about environmental problems, they rarely experience themselves as personally responsible for them. The thesis traces this gap between awareness and responsibility to deeper assumptions within liberal political thought about the nature of the self, freedom, and the role of markets.

Engaging critically with Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and Rawls, and drawing on C. B. Macpherson's account of possessive individualism, the thesis shows how liberal ideas of self-ownership and property converge on a conception of freedom primarily understood as economic freedom. Through an examination of Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman, and Friedrich Hayek, it analyses how economic freedom is defended as morally sufficient and how the figure of the *economic man*—a self-interested, utility-maximising market actor—is normalised as the central agent of modern societies. This framework is then tested against environmental problems such as the tragedy of the commons and common-pool resource management, engaging especially with Elinor Ostrom's work on the role of communities, shared norms, and institutional trust.

The second half of the thesis argues that liberal individualism is too thin to sustain robust environmental responsibility. It develops an alternative account of the situated self, embedded in constitutive communities, histories, and places, drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre's account of practices and traditions, Michael Sandel's conception of civic responsibility, and Charles Taylor's understanding of the self as located within a moral space. On this basis, the thesis advances *civic virtue environmentalism*: an environmental virtue ethics centred on *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) and *oikophilia* (love of home). It argues that the mutual reinforcement of these virtues generates a

form of grounded environmental judgement in which decision-making is both emotionally invested and prudentially sound.

The central conclusion is that *civic virtue environmentalism* offers a more adequate and ethically robust normative framework for responding to environmental challenges than liberal individualism and the economic man. By re-situating the self within networks of membership, tradition, and place, it provides a thicker account of responsibility and explains how environmental stewardship can be understood as an expression of civic virtue rather than a burdensome constraint on individual freedom.

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ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον.
Man is by nature a political animal.
— Aristotle, *Politics* I.2, 1253a2–3

I cannot answer the question “What ought I to do?” unless I first answer the question “Of which story or stories do I find myself a part?”
— Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

A sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused...
— William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.
— John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

Introduction

This thesis arose as a kind of protest against the extreme individualism that marks contemporary life, especially in large cities. Anonymity, the relentless pursuit of self-interest, the erosion of belonging, and—perhaps most importantly—the loss of shared meaning and common purpose have become defining features of our social world. We increasingly indulge the hubris that the individual, standing alone, can achieve anything, owing nothing to neighbours, fellow citizens, or the communities that sustain them.

Yet a genuine community is not simply a network of interchangeable individuals. It is rooted in place, shaped by shared values, traditions, and a history in common. Aristotle famously described the human being as a political animal: a creature whose flourishing is bound to the life of the *polis*, who cannot thrive in isolation from it. The human person is, by nature, situated within a larger order—social, historical, and natural. That wider, *deeply interfused* order of nature is too often forgotten. When it is, the costs are not only social and personal; they are environmental. We cease to see ourselves as stewards of a world we share and inherit and instead behave as if we were its masters and proprietors. The reflections and arguments that follow seek to recover an older intuition: that our good is inseparable from the communities and landscapes to which we belong, and that our freedom is perfected, rather than diminished, when it is exercised in responsibility to them.

Environmental questions in the twenty-first century are often framed as technical or scientific problems: questions of emissions trajectories, climate sensitivity, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion. Yet beneath these empirical issues lie deeper assumptions about who we are, how we relate to others, and what we take freedom to mean. In this thesis, I argue that contemporary environmental challenges cannot be adequately understood or addressed without examining the dominant picture of the self that underpins liberal societies, and that this picture—

centred on the self-owning, market-oriented *economic man*—proves ethically and politically insufficient in the face of environmental crisis.

The starting point of the project is a tension that emerges in much empirical work on environmental attitudes. Surveys in the EU, US, and UK indicate that many individuals express concern about environmental problems, but relatively few feel personally implicated in their causes or responsible for addressing them. This gap between concern and responsibility appears not simply as a matter of information or motivation, but as a reflection of deeper assumptions about individual agency, autonomy, and obligation. Within liberal democracies, the emphasis on individual rights and economic freedom often marginalises considerations of the common good, and especially of environmental stewardship. In practice, the pursuit of convenience, consumption, and economic advantage can contribute to environmental pressures that ultimately restrict the very freedoms individuals value.

The thesis approaches this tension by moving beyond crisis-driven or narrowly market-oriented responses to environmental issues. Instead, it investigates the philosophical assumptions that shape contemporary attitudes, focusing in particular on liberal conceptions of the self and their relation to community, markets, and the environment. I do not seek to amplify alarmist rhetoric or to reject liberalism altogether. Rather, I argue that a particular strand of liberal individualism—centred on possessive self-ownership and economic freedom—offers too shallow a conception of the self and of freedom to sustain robust environmental responsibility. My aim is to show how this strand arose, how it shapes our thinking, and why it needs to be supplemented and, in some respects, replaced.

The first part of the thesis is diagnostic. It traces the emergence of liberal conceptions of the self from Hobbes and Locke through Mill to Rawls, highlighting how the self is increasingly modelled as a rights-bearing, rational chooser whose identity is detachable from particular communities and practices. C. B. Macpherson's account of possessive individualism is central here:

it shows how the liberal subject comes to be seen as the proprietor of their own person and capacities, relating to others primarily through contracts and exchanges. The thesis then examines how this conception is taken up and intensified in libertarian and neoliberal thought, especially in the work of Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman, and Friedrich Hayek. In different ways, these thinkers defend economic freedom as the primary, or even sufficient, sphere of human agency and present the economic man—the self-interested, utility-maximising market actor—as both norm and ideal.

This analysis leads to a further set of questions: how does the economic man respond to environmental problems, and what kind of responsibility can such an agent acknowledge? To explore this, the thesis turns to the tragedy of the commons and the management of common-pool resources, drawing on the work of Elinor Ostrom. Her research shows that communities can, under certain conditions, manage shared resources sustainably through local norms, trust, and institutional arrangements. These findings reveal both the possibilities and the limits of liberal individualism: they show that successful environmental governance often depends on forms of mutual recognition, shared practice, and belonging that the economic-man model does not fully capture.

The second part of the thesis is constructive. Building on communitarian critiques of liberalism, it argues that environmental responsibility requires a shift from the unencumbered, abstract, self-owning individual to a situated self, embedded in communities, traditions, and places. Here I bring into conversation Alasdair MacIntyre's account of practices and traditions, Michael Sandel's conception of civic responsibility, and Charles Taylor's understanding of the self as located within a moral space. These thinkers, in different ways, show that identity and agency are shaped by the communities and narratives within which individuals find themselves. This provides a more adequate ontological basis for environmental responsibility than the thin, economistic image of the self.

On this foundation, the final chapters develop a positive proposal: *civic virtue environmentalism*. This framework draws on virtue ethics to articulate the qualities of character needed for responsible environmental agency, with a particular focus on *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) and *oikophilia* (love of home). *Phronēsis* enables agents to deliberate well about how to act in complex, context-dependent situations; *oikophilia* expresses a form of attachment to place that can motivate care for local environments and the communities that inhabit them. The mutual reinforcement of these virtues generates a form of grounded environmental judgement in which decision-making is both emotionally invested and prudentially sound. The central claim of the thesis is that civic virtue environmentalism provides a more adequate and ethically robust framework for responding to environmental challenges than liberal individualism and the economic man.

Chapter 1

Environmental Challenges and Human Impact in the 21st Century

1.1 Empirical and Scientific Information on Climate Trends and Changes

The Earth's environment is a complex and dynamic system that has undergone significant shifts throughout geological time. In recent decades, concern has grown regarding the pace and nature of contemporary environmental changes, particularly in connection with human activities. This opening chapter offers a balanced overview of current scientific understanding of environmental challenges, such as changes in global temperature patterns, extreme weather phenomena, and broader ecological pressures. It also considers the ongoing debates within the scientific community regarding the drivers, scale, and implications of these changes.

Recent data produced by major scientific institutions indicate notable alterations in global temperature trends. For example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reported that September 2021 ranked among the warmest in the 142-year instrumental climate record. While such figures are significant, they must be interpreted within the context of long-term trends and natural variability. The summer of 2021 also saw widespread extreme weather events across several regions: severe heatwaves and wildfires affected parts of Southern Europe; Germany and Belgium experienced catastrophic flooding; and drought conditions disrupted agricultural production in Russia and Canada, both major wheat producers. These events have prompted questions concerning the relationship between environmental patterns, human vulnerability, and longer-term environmental trends.¹

Although individual extreme events may carry substantial socioeconomic consequences, attributing them directly and conclusively to broader environmental changes requires careful scientific interpretation. As meteorologist Dr Jeff Masters has observed, extreme weather events

¹ See Euro News (17.08.2021), Shannon McDonagh, 'Every single one of these European countries has broken heat records this year'.

can challenge human societies regardless of their underlying causes.² Within the scientific community, research continues into the drivers of contemporary environmental challenges, with many scientists emphasising anthropogenic factors—particularly greenhouse gas emissions—while others highlight the importance of appreciating natural variability and maintaining a cautious interpretation of long-term projections.

This introductory section, therefore, presents scientific information on recent environmental changes and their potential causes, considering both natural and anthropogenic influences. It aims to provide a measured and comprehensive foundation for understanding the environmental challenges facing the planet in the twenty-first century and to support the ensuing philosophical analysis.

Natural Climate Variability and Forcings

The Earth's environmental conditions have always been subject to natural variation.³ This inherent variability forms a central point of discussion among scientists holding differing perspectives on current environmental trends. Richard Lindzen, for example, underscores the historical context of environmental fluctuations, referencing past ice ages, interglacial periods, and other significant natural oscillations as evidence of long-standing variability within the Earth's systems.⁴

A crucial distinction arises between natural variability and external forcings. Natural variability includes regular and irregular fluctuations such as the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), which can drive substantial short-term shifts in global weather patterns.⁵ By contrast, climate

² See Weather Underground (29.04.2016), Jeff Masters, 'Food System Shock: Climate Change's Greatest Threat to Civilization'.

³ Climate is defined as the average weather over some period. It is a statistical concept.

⁴ Lindzen, R. S. (1994). Climate dynamics and global change. *Annual Review of Fluid Mechanics*, 26(1), 353-378.

⁵ Trenberth, K. E. (1997). The definition of El Niño. *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, 78(12), 2771-2778.

forcings refer to processes that alter the Earth's energy balance over longer periods.⁶ Natural forcings include:

- Solar variability, involving fluctuations in solar radiation reaching the Earth. Although solar activity does change, recent research suggests its contribution to twentieth- and twenty-first-century warming may be limited.⁷
- Volcanic eruptions, which can inject aerosols into the stratosphere and temporarily cool the Earth's surface. The 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo is a notable example, having produced a measurable, albeit short-lived, cooling effect.⁸
- Orbital changes, including long-term variations in the Earth's orbit (Milankovitch cycles) that influence climate patterns over thousands of years and play a significant role in the timing of glacial and interglacial periods.⁹

Understanding these natural processes is essential for contextualising contemporary environmental changes. However, many scientists argue that natural forcings alone cannot fully explain the environmental patterns observed since the Industrial Revolution, especially regarding atmospheric composition and temperature trends.¹⁰ This has led to heightened scrutiny of anthropogenic—or human-related—factors. Nevertheless, the relative contribution of natural and human influences remains a subject of active research and debate. Scientists, such as John Christy, caution against overstating the certainty of human contributions, highlighting the complexities of environmental modelling and the need for humility in interpreting long-term projections.¹¹

⁶ Hansen, J., et al. (2005). Efficacy of climate forcings. *Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres*, 110(D18).

⁷ Lean, J. L. (2018). Observation-based detection and attribution of 21st century climate change. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 9(2), e511.

⁸ Robock, A. (2000). Volcanic eruptions and climate. *Reviews of Geophysics*, 38(2), 191-219.

⁹ Berger, A. (1988). Milankovitch theory and climate. *Reviews of Geophysics*, 26(4), 624-657.

¹⁰ Myhre, G., et al. (2013). Anthropogenic and Natural Radiative Forcing. In: *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis*. Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Christy, J. R. (2017). Testimony to the U.S. House Committee on Science, Space & Technology.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that a nuanced and multifaceted approach is necessary to understand current environmental challenges. Such an approach recognises both natural processes and human influences, while remaining open to emerging evidence and diverse scientific perspectives.¹²

Greenhouse Gases and Human Activity

Building on the discussion of natural variability and forcings, it is important to consider the ways in which atmospheric composition and human activity interact with environmental processes. The Earth's atmosphere functions as a delicate regulatory system, moderating temperature through the natural greenhouse effect. Certain gases trap heat that would otherwise escape into space, helping to maintain the conditions necessary for life.¹³

While this natural process is essential, scientific research has explored how alterations in atmospheric composition might influence energy balance. Human activities since the Industrial Revolution have changed the concentration of several atmospheric gases. The combustion of fossil fuels, industrial processes, and land-use changes have increased levels of carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), and nitrous oxide (N₂O).¹⁴ The interpretation of these changes remains an area of active scientific inquiry. Some researchers argue that human-related increases in greenhouse gases play a significant role in recent environmental shifts.¹⁵ Others emphasise the degree of complexity within environmental systems and suggest that the level of sensitivity to CO₂ increases may be lower than predicted by some models.¹⁶

¹² Knutti, R., & Hegerl, G. C. (2008). The equilibrium sensitivity of the Earth's temperature to radiation changes. *Nature Geoscience*, 1(11), 735-743.

¹³ Pierrehumbert, R. T. (2011). Infrared radiation and planetary temperature. *Physics Today*, 64(1), 33-38.

¹⁴ IPCC, 2021: Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, doi:[10.1017/9781009157896.001](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157896.001).

¹⁵ Cook, J., et al. (2016). Consensus on consensus: a synthesis of consensus estimates on human-caused global warming. *Environmental Research Letters*, 11(4), 048002.

¹⁶ Lindzen, R. S., & Choi, Y. S. (2011). On the observational determination of climate sensitivity and its implications. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Atmospheric Sciences*, 47(4), 377-390.

Human activities can affect the environment in diverse ways, not all of which necessarily lead to warming. For example, while greenhouse gases may contribute to warming trends, aerosols produced by certain industrial processes can have a cooling effect by reflecting sunlight.¹⁷ Land-use changes, including deforestation and urbanisation, can modify local and regional environments by altering physical surface characteristics and ecological processes.¹⁸

The global carbon cycle is central to regulating atmospheric CO₂ concentrations. Forests, oceans, and soil microorganisms act as carbon sinks, absorbing substantial quantities of CO₂.¹⁹ Human activities such as deforestation can disrupt these natural mechanisms by reducing the Earth's capacity to absorb carbon. Yet the relationship between land-use change and atmospheric CO₂ is multifaceted: reforestation efforts, for instance, may enhance carbon uptake, while some studies suggest that higher CO₂ levels may stimulate plant growth in certain ecosystems, partially offsetting emissions.²⁰

Further complexity arises from climate feedbacks—processes that may amplify or moderate initial changes in the climate system. These include water vapour feedback, ice-albedo effects, and cloud interactions.²¹ Discussions about possible *tipping points* have also emerged, referring to hypothetical thresholds after which environmental systems may undergo rapid or irreversible changes. However, the nature, existence, and relevance of such tipping points remain topics of ongoing scientific evaluation.²²

¹⁷ Ramanathan, V., & Feng, Y. (2009). Air pollution, greenhouse gases and climate change: Global and regional perspectives. *Atmospheric Environment*, 43(1), 37-50.

¹⁸ Pielke, R. A., et al. (2011). Land use/land cover changes and climate: modelling analysis and observational evidence. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 2(6), 828-850.

¹⁹ Friedlingstein, P., et al. (2019). Global carbon budget 2019. *Earth System Science Data*, 11(4), 1783-1838.

²⁰ Zhu, Z., et al. (2016). Greening of the Earth and its drivers. *Nature Climate Change*, 6(8), 791-795.

²¹ Soden, B. J., & Held, I. M. (2006). An assessment of climate feedbacks in coupled ocean-atmosphere models. *Journal of Climate*, 19(14), 3354-3360.

²² Lenton, T. M., et al. (2008). Tipping elements in the Earth's climate system. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105(6), 1786-1793.

Given these intricacies, it is essential to approach questions of atmospheric composition and environmental change with careful attention to the diversity of scientific perspectives. This section therefore offers an account that reflects the complexity and uncertainty inherent in the field, while acknowledging the significance of human activity as an area of ongoing research.

Carbon Dioxide and Its Environmental Impact

The concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere has risen steadily since the Industrial Revolution, with the rate of increase accelerating in recent decades. This development has been the subject of substantial scientific study and continuing debate concerning its causes and implications for global environmental systems. A wide range of research indicates that much of the increase in atmospheric CO₂ is associated with human activity.²³ The correlation between human emissions and atmospheric concentrations since the late eighteenth century is well documented across historical and scientific records (Fig. 1).

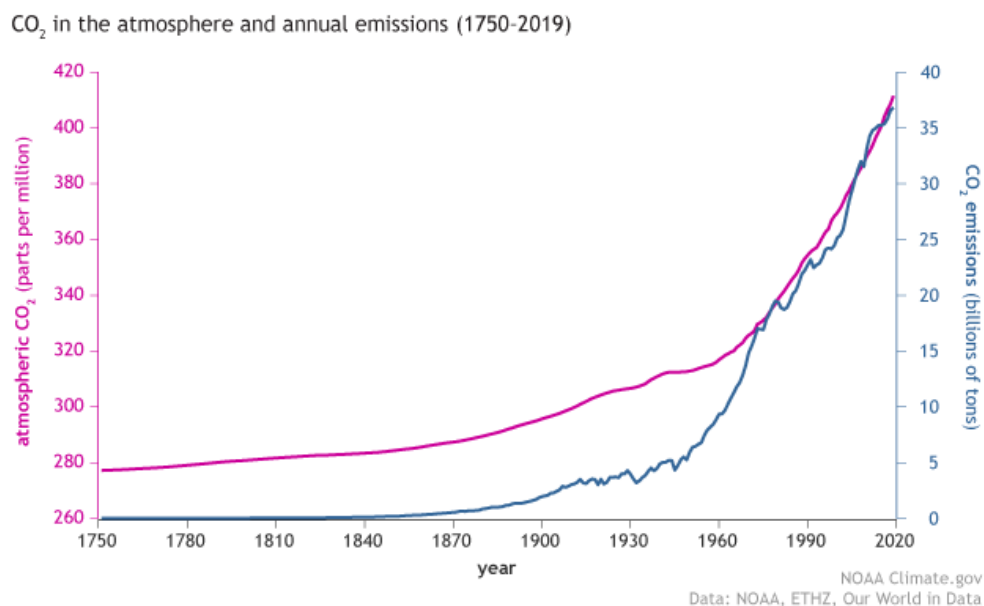


Fig. 1. Atmospheric CO₂ concentrations (raspberry line) have increased in parallel with human emissions (blue line) since 1750. (Image credit: NOAA Climate.gov)

²³ IPCC, 2021: Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, doi:[10.1017/9781009157896.001](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157896.001).

Natural processes—including uptake by oceans, forests, and soils—continue to play a significant role in the global carbon cycle. However, the current pace of increase, combined with large-scale land-use changes such as deforestation, has contributed to elevated atmospheric concentrations.²⁴ Several lines of evidence support the view that human activity has influenced this rise. For example:

- Carbon isotope measurements differentiate between CO₂ originating from fossil fuel combustion and that from natural processes.²⁵
- Declining atmospheric oxygen levels correspond with increased burning of carbon-based fuels.²⁶
- Ocean acidification suggests that oceans are absorbing more CO₂ than they release, consistent with their functioning as net carbon sinks.²⁷

In conclusion, the predominant scientific view is that human activities—including fossil fuel use, industrial development, and land-use change—have significantly contributed to rising atmospheric CO₂ levels. The Industrial Revolution and subsequent technological progression have yielded profound improvements in human wellbeing, including advances in healthcare, longevity, and economic development. Yet, these achievements have also been accompanied by environmental pressures. The extensive use of fossil fuels and expansion of human settlements have altered elements of the Earth's energy balance. Although the long-term consequences of these developments remain the subject of active scientific research and debate, growing evidence points to a variety of environmental and societal effects. These impacts differ across regions and

²⁴ Le Quéré, C., et al. (2018). Global Carbon Budget 2018. *Earth System Science Data*, 10(4), 2141-2194.

²⁵ Keeling, R. F., & Manning, A. C. (2014). Studies of Recent Changes in Atmospheric O₂ Content. *Treatise on Geochemistry*, 385-404.

²⁶ Keeling, R. F., & Manning, A. C. (2014). Studies of Recent Changes in Atmospheric O₂ Content. *Treatise on Geochemistry*, 385-404.

²⁷ Doney, S. C., et al. (2009). Ocean Acidification: The Other CO₂ Problem. *Annual Review of Marine Science*, 1(1), 169-192.

ecosystems, emphasising the need for ongoing analysis of the relationship between technological progress, human prosperity, and environmental stewardship.

Global Environmental Warming and Its Impacts on Human and Natural Systems

To understand the relationship between atmospheric composition and environmental change, it is helpful to distinguish clearly between *weather* and *climate*. Weather describes short-term atmospheric conditions, while climate refers to long-term average patterns within a particular area. Weather is highly variable and unpredictable, whereas climate tends to follow more stable trends over longer periods.²⁸

Variations in the Earth's energy balance—whether producing warming or cooling—can influence average weather patterns and the frequency of extreme events. Although attributing any single weather event directly to long-term environmental trends is challenging, changes in broader climate patterns may shape the likelihood or intensity of certain events.²⁹ Global surface temperature records indicate an average warming of approximately 1.2°C since 1880.³⁰ This observed trend has prompted international discussions on potential consequences and strategies for mitigation. The Paris Agreement, informed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report, set a target to keep global warming *well below* 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with an aspiration to limit warming to 1.5°C.³¹

The IPCC's *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C*, which synthesised around 6,000 peer-reviewed studies, estimated the present warming rate at approximately 0.2°C per decade, largely associated with greenhouse gas emissions. The report also highlighted regional variation in environmental impacts, noting, for example:

²⁸ See NASA, 1.2.2005

²⁹ Trenberth, K. E., et al. (2015). Attribution of climate extreme events. *Nature Climate Change*, 5(8), 725-730.

³⁰ Lindsey, R., & Dahlman, L. (2021). *Climate Change: Global Temperature*. NOAA Climate.gov.

³¹ United Nations. (2015). Paris Agreement. United Nations Treaty Collection.

- Increased likelihood of extreme temperature events in mid- and high-latitude regions
- Potential shifts in precipitation patterns, meaning some regions may experience heightened drought risk while others face heavier rainfall

These findings form part of a substantial and evolving body of scientific work. While the precise magnitude and distribution of future impacts remain uncertain, research continues to refine understanding of how changes in atmospheric composition and energy balance may interact with natural and human systems.³² This ongoing scientific inquiry contributes to international discussions on adaptation strategies, risk assessment, and environmental policy.

1.2 Public Perceptions of Environmental Challenges in the EU, UK, and US

Having outlined the scientific landscape surrounding contemporary environmental challenges, it is important to consider how these issues are perceived by the public. Although a broad scientific consensus exists regarding the influence of human activity on environmental changes, public attitudes vary significantly.³³ This section examines public perceptions in the European Union, United Kingdom, and United States, illustrating a consistent finding: there is often a noticeable gap between recognising environmental issues as serious and acknowledging one's own contribution to them.

This discrepancy—resembling what is sometimes termed “cognitive dissonance”—is central to the concerns explored throughout the thesis. It invites further investigation into the cultural, political, and philosophical contexts that shape environmental attitudes within contemporary Western liberal democracies.³⁴

³² IPCC. (2018). Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways. World Meteorological Organization, Geneva, Switzerland.

³³ Whitmarsh, L. (2011). Scepticism and uncertainty about climate change: Dimensions, determinants and change over time. *Global Environmental Change*, 21(2), 690-700.

³⁴ Cognitive dissonance refers to the psychological discomfort experienced when one's beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours are inconsistent with each other. In this context, it describes the tension between acknowledging environmental

Public Perceptions in the European Union

According to a 2021 survey commissioned by the Directorate-General for Climate Action, 93% of Europeans regard environmental change as a serious problem.³⁵ Yet only 18% describe it as the most pressing global issue, ranking it below concerns such as poverty and infectious disease. Furthermore, while awareness is high, only 41% believe they hold personal responsibility for addressing environmental challenges.³⁶ This gap in understanding between concern and personal agency is especially relevant in societies shaped by strong commitments to individual autonomy.

Public Perceptions in the United States

A longitudinal study conducted between 2008 and 2017 by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Centre for Climate Change Communication found that 72% of Americans believe environmental changes are occurring, with 60% attributing these to human activity. However, the same study revealed a persistent optimism bias: 73% expect environmental challenges to harm future generations, but 46% do not expect to be personally affected.³⁷ This reflects a broader cultural theme in American public opinion concerning distance and immediacy in risk perception.

Public Perceptions in the United Kingdom

In the UK, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's 2021 public attitudes tracker reported that 80% of adults express concern about environmental change, and 51% believe human activity is the main cause.³⁸ However, relatively few respondents reported making

problems while failing to recognize one's role in them. (Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.)

³⁵ European Commission. (2021). Special Eurobarometer 513: Climate Change.

³⁶ European Commission. (2021). Special Eurobarometer 513: Climate Change.

³⁷ Leiserowitz, A., et al. (2020). *Climate Change in the American Mind: April 2020*. Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

³⁸ Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. (2021). *BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker: Wave 37*.

significant lifestyle adjustments with only 11% of them reducing food waste, and 13% having shifted towards more sustainable modes of transport. More recent ONS data from 2024 presents a more complex picture. While approximately three-quarters of adults reported having made some lifestyle changes to address climate change, the proportion identifying the issue as important had declined from a high of 69% in mid-2023 to 57% by October 2024 — suggesting that environmental salience is subject to displacement by more immediately felt material concerns. Critically, among those who had made no changes, the most commonly cited reasons were a sense that individual action is ineffective (42%) and a belief that large-scale institutional actors should act first (37%). These are not expressions of ignorance or apathy but of a specific moral logic — one that locates responsibility structurally rather than individually.³⁹

Paradoxical Global Attitudes

A global 2021 survey by Kantar Public, conducted across ten countries, further illustrates this gap.⁴⁰ While 78% of respondents expressed personal concern about environmental problems, nearly half (46%) believed they did not need to change their habits, and 74% felt proud of their existing efforts.

These findings collectively present a complex landscape of public views. Although many individuals acknowledge environmental issues as significant, there remains a marked reluctance to connect personal practices with environmental outcomes. While survey design can influence such results, and while public opinion evolves over time, these patterns raise important questions about the relationship between knowledge, responsibility, and action in contemporary societies.⁴¹

³⁹ Office for National Statistics (2024). *Public and business attitudes to the environment and climate change, Great Britain: 2024*. Released 13 November 2024.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/publicandbusinessattitudestotheenvironmentandclimatechangegreatbritain/2024> [accessed 14/04/26]

⁴⁰ Kantar Public. (2021). G7 countries citizens' views on climate change.

⁴¹ Schuldt, J.P., Konrath, S.H., & Schwarz, N. (2011). 'Global warming' or 'climate change'? Whether the planet is warming depends on question wording. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 75(1), 115-124.

This tension underlines the philosophical concerns at the heart of the thesis. It suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to prompt meaningful behavioural change, pointing towards deeper cultural and ethical factors—including conceptions of individual freedom and responsibility—shaping how environmental challenges are understood.

A 2022–23 YouGov study of over 10,000 UK adults further complicates the binary of awareness versus inaction by identifying six distinct attitudinal profiles, differentiated primarily by their views on *who bears responsibility* for environmental action. Notably, two of the largest segments, the 'Externalising Passives' (20%) and the 'Outside-Pointing Worriers' (17%), share a fundamental orientation of displacing personal responsibility onto governments and corporations. The existence of these orientations as stable, internally coherent positions, rather than mere failures of awareness, suggests that the awareness-action gap identified in earlier research is better understood as a structural feature of how citizens in liberal democracies conceptualise the relationship between individual agency and collective responsibility.⁴²

1.3 Summary: Scientific Perspectives and Public Perceptions

This opening chapter has outlined the interaction between scientific analysis and public perception in relation to contemporary environmental challenges. It has surveyed current scientific evidence concerning climate change and wider environmental degradation and examined how these issues are understood by the public in different liberal democracies.

The scientific community generally agrees that human activities—particularly the extensive use of fossil fuels and associated greenhouse gas emissions—have contributed to observable changes in the climate system.⁴³ At the same time, the interpretation of these trends and their long-

⁴² YouGov (2023). *Public attitudes towards sustainability: a YouGov Public showcase*. March 2023. <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/45446-public-attitudes-towards-sustainability-yougov-pub> [accessed 14/04/26]

⁴³ IPCC, 2021: Summary for Policymakers. In: *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*.

term implications remains subject to ongoing debate. While some researchers predict severe environmental and societal impacts even from relatively modest increases in average global temperatures, others stress the uncertainties inherent in climate modelling and the complex role of natural variability.⁴⁴ These differing perspectives underscore the need for scientific humility and continued research, without undermining the seriousness of the risks identified.

The examination of public perceptions in the EU, US, and UK reveals a consistent pattern. Many individuals report concern about environmental problems and express support for general environmental protection. Yet comparatively few feel personally implicated in causing these problems or responsible for contributing to their solution.⁴⁵ This disjunction between expressed concern and perceived responsibility is reflected in attitudes towards lifestyle change, consumption, and political action, where support for abstract goals often coexists with resistance to concrete sacrifices or obligations.

Taken together, these scientific and attitudinal findings suggest that environmental challenges must be understood not only as physical processes, but also as phenomena shaped by human beliefs, values, and patterns of response. The chapters that follow build on this empirical and conceptual background, moving from the external description of environmental problems and public attitudes to a philosophical investigation of the ideas about the self, freedom, and responsibility that inform those attitudes.

⁴⁴ Koonin, S. E. (2021). *Unsettled: What Climate Science Tells Us, What It Doesn't, and Why It Matters*. BenBella Books. See also, Curry, J. (2014). Climate Change: What's the Worst Case? *Global Environmental Change*, 27, 1-13.

⁴⁵ Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Rosenthal, S., Kotcher, J., Bergquist, P., Ballew, M., Goldberg, M., & Gustafson, A. (2020). *Climate Change in the American Mind: April 2020*. Yale Program on Climate Change Communication

Chapter 2

The Emergence of the Idea of the Self in Liberal Thought: From Hobbes and Locke, to Mill and Rawls– A Critical Analysis

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 ended by identifying a striking tension in contemporary environmental attitudes. Many citizens in liberal democracies report concern about climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, yet comparatively few experience themselves as personally implicated in these problems or as having robust responsibilities to address them. This gap between awareness and responsibility cannot be explained simply by lack of information or motivation. It points instead to deeper assumptions about what it is to be an individual, what freedom is for, and how the self is related to others and to the natural world.

This chapter takes those assumptions as its central object of inquiry. It asks how the dominant liberal conception of the *self* has emerged and why it is so easily reconciled with patterns of behaviour that are environmentally damaging yet experienced as expressions of individual freedom. The environmental challenges surveyed in Chapter 1 suggest that there is a disjunction between a liberal understanding of liberty—as non-interference, choice, and rights—and the kinds of moral obligations that would be required to sustain common goods such as stable climates, healthy ecosystems, and liveable local environments.

The twenty-first-century individual in Western liberal societies can be characterised as what John Stuart Mill, in *On the Definition and Method of Political Economy*, (1836) described as the *homo economicus*.⁴⁶ This model owes much of its status and entitlements to the modern interpretation of

⁴⁶ The model of *homo economicus*, can be found within societies with other political systems as well, such as in communist, in monarchies or in any other authoritarian regimes. However, the focus here is on the man of Western liberal societies, as this thesis investigates the concept of the self in such political systems. Can be found in: Mill, J. (2007). *On the Definition and Method of Political Economy*. In D. Hausman, *The Philosophy of Economics: An Anthology* (pp. 41-58). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published in 1836)

individual liberty. Contemporary trends suggest that the economic man of today is motivated primarily by self-interest—financial gain, social status, power, personal success, and the maximisation of pleasure. Western liberal societies, while formally securing basic rights and opportunities, can nevertheless be described as highly individualistic, privileging personal fulfilment often at the expense of broader social or civic considerations.⁴⁷

In its extreme form, this pursuit of personal fulfilment becomes a solitary endeavour in which moral obligations, civic ties, and social membership hold diminishing significance. This orientation towards the ‘self’ has contributed substantially to the consumerist culture that has expanded over recent decades. The point becomes strikingly clear when examining corporate profit trends: for instance, Apple’s net sales rose from 274.52 billion USD in 2020 to 365.82 billion USD in 2021, while Amazon’s net income increased from 21.3 billion USD in 2020 to 33.36 billion USD in 2021. Such figures illustrate the scale of contemporary consumer demand and the broader cultural forces sustaining it.⁴⁸

These patterns do not emerge in a vacuum. They reflect a deeper political and cultural context in which Western liberal democracies have, over time, institutionalised a particular understanding of freedom—one that aligns closely with market participation and economic choice. In such systems, individual liberty is frequently interpreted through the lens of personal autonomy, private rights, and the freedom to acquire, exchange, and consume. While these freedoms are central to liberal democratic life, their dominance has shaped a conception of the individual that equates liberty predominantly with economic agency. This framing of freedom forms the background against which consumerism has flourished: the interpretation of freedom as *economic*.

⁴⁷To illustrate this point, I have employed Weber’s concept of an *ideal type* to identify certain societal tendencies, specifically the ideal type of the economic man who exhibits particular behaviours when actuated by purely economic motives. For details see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/#IdeaType> [accessed 06/11/2022]

⁴⁸Apple revenue worldwide 2021 | Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265125/total-net-sales-of-apple-since-2004/> [accessed 12/08/22]

This interpretation carries significant risks. In authoritarian regimes, limited political liberties may be obscured by the appearance of consumer choice. In liberal democracies, by contrast, the reduction of freedom to market participation fosters a narrow understanding of autonomy that encourages consumption without corresponding awareness of its societal or environmental impact.

Individual choices—such as the widespread use of single-use plastics—illustrate how actions that appear benign at the personal level can produce profound collective consequences. Convenience-driven preferences create market demand, leading to expanded production and distribution. Yet the environmental costs, from resource extraction to long-term environmental harm, become fully visible only at a collective scale. This raises important questions concerning individual responsibility and the moral dimensions of decision-making in contexts where consequences are cumulative rather than isolated.⁴⁹

These tensions prompt deeper reflection on the development of the liberal conception of the *self*. The liberal tradition has long grappled with the concept of the self, placing the individual at the centre of its philosophical and political discourse. At its core, liberal philosophy depicts the individual as an autonomous, rational agent free to pursue their own ends within the limits of a just society. A central thread across liberal thinkers is the claim that individuals possess dignity and inviolability grounded in their rational agency. This premise underpins arguments for individual rights and liberties throughout the liberal tradition. Yet, although this theme persists, its interpretation and application have developed differently across historical and social contexts, revealing both continuities and significant shifts in emphasis.

⁴⁹ For more on the environmental impact of single use plastics see <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/single-use-plastics-101#corporations>

To investigate this development, the chapter traces the emergence of the liberal self from Thomas Hobbes's account of *egoistic* human nature, through John Locke's influential doctrine of *self-ownership* and property, to John Stuart Mill's more nuanced conception of the self-developed individual, where the ideals of *individuality* and self-development are fully embraced. Finally, it considers John Rawls's differentiation between the *political* and the *private* individual, a distinction that has shaped debates between liberals and communitarians concerning the role of moral reasoning in the public sphere. Each of these thinkers is examined through the prism of their social contract theories (where applicable) and their broader accounts of individual liberty and obligation.

By examining the emergence of the liberal self, it becomes evident that the notion of the *atomised* individual—often expressed as rugged individualism—has come to dominate modern liberal societies. While not inherently problematic, this conception of the individual poses substantial challenges when confronted with complex, collective issues such as environmental degradation. The atomised self, oriented primarily towards personal rights and economic freedoms, struggles to integrate individual actions with their broader social and environmental implications.

Tracing this trajectory—from Hobbes's egoistic human nature to Rawls's political and private individual—reveals how the liberal tradition has grappled with questions of individual freedom and responsibility, social obligation, and the *common good*. This analysis provides the conceptual groundwork for the later critique of the *unencumbered self* and for the constructive account of the situated, civic, and environmentally responsible self which is developed in the second part of the thesis. Before that constructive turn is possible, however, it is necessary to understand how the *liberal self* came to be imagined in the first place. The next section therefore turns to Hobbes, whose account of human nature and political order sets many of the terms within which subsequent liberal thought has operated.

2.2 Hobbes's Conception of Human Nature: Power, Self-Interest, and the Social Contract

Hobbes's (1651) theory of human nature, primarily developed in his work *Leviathan*, presents a materialistic view of the individual as a system of matter driven by motion. This section examines Hobbes's perspective on human nature and its implications for his social contract theory, while also considering its broader impact on the liberal conception of the self.

Hobbes posits that human behaviour is fundamentally governed by appetites and aversions. These appetites—understood as desires encompassing both material and immaterial pleasures—are the primary motivators of human action. He argues that voluntary actions result from a calculative process whereby individuals determine which decisions are most likely to fulfil these appetites. Hobbes distinguishes between innate appetites, such as the need for food, and acquired appetites that stem from individual experiences. Crucially, he asserts that these appetites are in a constant state of flux and vary among individuals, leading to differing levels of satisfaction.⁵⁰

One of the key elements in understanding the role of Hobbes's doctrine of human nature in the development of the idea of the self within the liberal tradition is the concept of *power*. He provides a general definition of power in men as the “present means to obtain some future apparent good”.⁵¹ He distinguishes between *natural* and *instrumental* power, where natural refers to the faculties of the body and mind, such as strength or nobility and instrumental refers to these powers acquired by fortune and which are instruments to acquire more, such as riches and reputation.

For Hobbes, power defines men's ability to survive and obtain future apparent goods. Given this appetite-driven nature, it is inevitable then that men would compete with each other in order to acquire more power and increase their prospects for a commodious living, or at least to maintain

⁵⁰ Hobbes T. (1968), *Leviathan*, (C.B. Macpherson Ed.), Harmondsworth: Penguin Publishers, pp.119-120. (Original work published 1651)

⁵¹ Hobbes, p.150

their existing powers and secure their preservation. He concludes that all men are in a constant, ceaseless pursuit of power which can only end in death.

So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death. And the cause of this, is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he has present, without the acquisition of more.⁵²

At this point, men's need for power, in Hobbes's analysis, becomes, C.B. Macpherson (1968) argues, potentially harmful.⁵³ This is because power becomes defined as the excess of one's power over another's. In other words, a man's power is measured as how much more power he has compared to another individual. In that sense, power becomes something instrumental and is no longer natural. Men do not need just the required power to survive and secure their living; they seek instrumental power: a tool for gaining control over the powers of other individuals. Thus, power is no longer simply a natural means for preservation but a mechanism for dominance and comparison.

Macpherson further contends that the mental model of society that Hobbes employs resembles a bourgeois market society. It is uncertain whether Hobbes consciously intended this parallel. Nevertheless, the depiction of individuals competing ceaselessly for power, and defining their worth by their comparative advantage, reflects a model of a market society—a theme that will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

Returning to Hobbes's own account, the implications of this ceaseless competition for power become starkly evident in his depiction of the state of nature.

⁵² Hobbes, p.161

⁵³ Hobbes, p.37

According to Hobbes, men in the state of nature have absolute freedom, allowing them to make their own judgements and decisions; every man has a right to everything, deriving from his natural right to self-preservation:

[..] the Liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say, of his own Life; and consequently, of doing any thing , which in his own Judgement and Reason, hee shall conceive to be the aptest means thereaunto.⁵⁴

From these observations on human nature, it follows that relationships are often fragmented and characterised by competition and a constant struggle for power. Hobbes identified three main causes of conflict among men: competition, diffidence, and glory. In the absence of regulations and laws to protect individual rights and interests, human nature and the desire for power can lead to a *state of war*, “where every man is enemy to every man”.⁵⁵ This violent condition threatens not only security and comfort but life itself.

Nevertheless, reasonable men, Hobbes argues, choose to submit their absolute freedom in return for safety. Hobbes's social contract theory proposes that rational individuals voluntarily abandon their primitive state of nature, governed solely by the law of nature, and join a civil society in which a sovereign power safeguards them.⁵⁶ Whilst they retain freedom to pursue personal goals, they relinquish their natural liberty and ultimate authority to the sovereign, who regulates to ensure order and security. This arrangement offers greater prospects for peace than the state of nature. Hobbes's intention is to defend his political theory of the legitimacy of an absolute sovereign, the *Leviathan*, and his social contract theory supports this objective by framing human nature as necessitating such authority.

⁵⁴ Hobbes, p.189

⁵⁵ Hobbes, pp.185-186

⁵⁶ According to Hobbes's Law of Nature a man is forbidden to do anything against his self-preservation and allowed to do everything in favour of it. This entitles men in the State of Nature to use their Right of Nature. Hobbes, p.190

His analysis of human nature has been controversial. Some scholars argue it portrays humans as asocial and self-centred. Paul Fairfield (2000), for example, claims that Hobbes's individuals appear as *appetite machines* who lack the elements that constitute humanity.⁵⁷ This highly individualistic element is evident in many modern theories of the liberal self. Fairfield argues that social contract theories, including Hobbes', justify this liberal conception of the self by presenting human aspirations to community, social bonds, and civilised life as strategic calculations for survival rather than expressions of innate sociability.⁵⁸

However, did Hobbes intend merely to justify a civil society based on fear and self-interest? Did he truly believe human life to be brutish, nasty, and short?⁵⁹ According to John Rawls (2007), this is a misinterpretation. Hobbes' social contract is less concerned with historical or empirical claims about human behaviour and more with outlining the rights and obligations within civil society and the powers of the sovereign.⁶⁰ As is commonly known and accepted, Hobbes's experiences during the English Civil War had a profound effect on his philosophical outlook. He believed that in the absence of a sovereign authority, life can be dangerous and unpredictable. He recognised men's natural tendency towards anarchy and violence when there is no common power in charge and no law enforcement to protect individuals. Rawls asserts that Hobbes highlights these characteristics strategically, to support his political theory emphasising sovereign authority.⁶¹

Rawls' reading thus presents a more nuanced Hobbesian individual. Humans are not necessarily asocial and egoistic, but capable of benevolence, kindness, and charity, with interests extending beyond self-interest.⁶² Yet, within Hobbes's civil society, the sovereign primarily protects the self-interest of individuals rather than fostering the idea of the common good or

⁵⁷ Fairfield, P. (2000). *Moral selfhood in the liberal tradition: the politics of individuality*. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press. p.29

⁵⁸ Fairfield, P. (2000). pp. 20-21

⁵⁹ Hobbes T., pp. 185-186

⁶⁰ Rawls, J., & Freeman, S. R. (2007). *Lectures on the history of political philosophy*. Belknap: Press of Harvard University Press. p.31

⁶¹ Rawls, J., & Freeman, S. R. (2007). *Lectures on the history of political philosophy*. Press of Harvard University Press. p.46

⁶² Hobbes T., p. 121

encouraging a virtuous life for the people.⁶³ Macpherson's concept of *possessive individualism* captures this perspective: Hobbes's theory effectively describes a market-like society, dominated by individualistic competition for power. This interpretation raises critical questions about the implications of Hobbesian theory for contemporary issues particularly regarding individual rights, societal obligations, and collective challenges.

This section has traced Hobbes's social contract theory and his interpretation of human nature, establishing the foundational role of self-interest and power in the liberal conception of the self. The subsequent chapter will examine in detail how possessive individualism manifests in Hobbes's work and why it proves problematic in modern contexts. Before turning to that critique, however, the following section considers how John Locke builds upon and refines Hobbesian foundations, further developing the liberal understanding of the individual through his theories of property, labour, and natural rights.

2.3 Locke and the Natural Rights of the Individual: Redefining Ownership

In contrast to Hobbes's portrayal of the state of nature as a ceaseless power struggle, Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) presents a markedly different perspective. Locke envisions individuals in the state of nature as free and equal, cognisant of their rights and duties through the guiding principle of *natural law*. This law, according to Locke, impels individuals to preserve their lives, protect their property, and respect others' possessions. Locke's doctrine is underpinned by a theological and metaphysical foundation, positing that God endowed mankind with reason, enabling them to comprehend and adhere to natural law. This premise fundamentally shapes his political philosophy and conception of natural rights.⁶⁴

⁶³ Hobbes T., p.376

⁶⁴ Locke J., (1980) *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C.B. Macpherson. Hackett publishing company, p.9 (Second Treatise, chap. 2, sec. 6), (Original work published in 1690)

Whilst Locke acknowledges that some individuals may contravene reason and equity, thereby violating natural law, he argues that in the state of nature, each person possesses the authority to judge and punish transgressions. However, this individual power of adjudication can lead to subjective judgments and potentially precipitate a state of war.⁶⁵ Consequently, Locke, like Hobbes, sees the state of war as a catalyst for individuals to enter civil society, relinquishing certain freedoms to a common authority capable of impartially resolving disputes.⁶⁶

Locke's chapter on property develops a novel conception of private ownership rooted in natural rights. He contends that God bestowed the earth, its products, and animals upon mankind for their preservation, thereby conferring a natural right to life and sustenance. This divine endowment entitles individuals to appropriate what is necessary for survival from the common property. Locke introduces the influential idea that individuals acquire ownership rights by mixing their labour with these resources. This *labour theory of value* posits that human effort adds worth to natural resources, justifying private ownership as a means of improving human life.

Through this reasoning, Locke articulates a vision of *self-ownership* and self-mastery. He argues that when a person applies their labour to natural resources, they extend their property rights over themselves to the fruits of their labour. This concept fundamentally redefines the relationship between individuals and property, suggesting that private ownership is not merely a social convention but a natural right derived from one's own efforts. Locke asserts that through reasoning and utilising their abilities, people can become masters of themselves and proprietors of their own person, making the best use of what nature has provided. This perspective not only justifies private property but also elevates the status of labour and individual initiative in Locke's political philosophy, laying the groundwork for later liberal economic theories:

⁶⁵ Locke J., pp.10-12

⁶⁶ Locke J., pp.15-16

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state nature hath placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other men: for this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others.⁶⁷

However, Locke imposed limitations on the right of appropriation. He contended that individuals should only take what they can utilise without waste, leaving sufficient resources for others. This constraint aligns with the natural right to life and the law of nature, negating the need for consent from others as it preserves everyone's rights.⁶⁸ Intriguingly, Locke circumvents these limitations by introducing the concept of money. While unlimited appropriation of perishable goods would violate natural law through waste, Locke argues that exchanging surplus for durable currency is acceptable. This mechanism allows individuals to accumulate property in various forms - land, money, or goods - beyond immediate need.⁶⁹ The social contract, then, serves to protect these acquisitions, with the state's role in civil society being to uphold natural law and penalise its violators.

Locke's theory of property and self-ownership has sparked scholarly debate. Macpherson (1962) interprets it as advocating atomistic individualism, justifying unlimited property appropriation. He sees Locke's notion of labour as an exchangeable commodity for wealth accumulation as emblematic of a market society. Similarly, Leo Strauss (1965) views Locke's doctrine as reflective of the capitalist spirit, arguing that it positions natural private vices like greed

⁶⁷ Locke J., p.19

⁶⁸ Locke J., pp.20-21

⁶⁹ Locke J.p.28

as potentially more beneficial to society than unendowed virtues. The legal protection of private property, in this view, places individual profit at the core of state interest, mirroring a capitalist societal model.⁷⁰

Conversely, Alan Ryan (2012) challenges the notion of rugged individualism attributed to Locke by Macpherson and Strauss. Ryan emphasises that in Locke's view, individuals grant the state rights and responsibilities, including law enforcement against wrongdoers, with state operations contingent on citizen consent. This interpretation suggests that Locke's individuals are not solely self-interested when entering civil society but have obligations to the collective. The state, in this reading, facilitates individuals' fulfilment of duties to others and protects them from harm, allowing for personal flourishing.⁷¹

Macpherson, however, remains unconvinced by such readings, contending that self-interest, rather than duty or common good, motivates individuals to join civil society in Locke's theory. He argues that *reason* compels individuals to protect their property, necessitating an agreement that safeguards owners from non-owners, ultimately overseen by the propertied class.⁷²

Both Locke's and Hobbes's social contract theories have significantly influenced liberal conceptions of the self, particularly notions of individual freedom and rights. Critics like Macpherson argue that their theories of human nature gave rise to the idea of *possessive individualism*. Hobbes presents egoistic individuals competing for unlimited power, while Locke's individuals, though obedient to moral law, justify unlimited wealth appropriation based on the natural right to life. The conception of individual freedom in both thinkers aligns more closely with *economic freedom* than with the broader notion of individual liberty advocated by later liberal

⁷⁰ Strauss, L. (1965). *Natural right and history* (1st Phoenix ed). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.p.246

⁷¹ Ryan A. (2012), *The making of modern liberalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p.250

⁷² Locke J., p. xx

thinkers like J.S. Mill who emphasises self-improvement and societal contribution over the pursuit of power or wealth.

2.4 Individuality, Self-Development and Freedom in Mill

In the preceding sections I explored Hobbes's and Locke's conception of the individual and his rights within the framework of social contract theory. Both philosophers envisioned men as rational, independent beings driven by the instinct of self-preservation. This self-interest, serves as the primary catalyst for individuals to embrace civil society, where the state acts as a guardian of their interests. Critics such as Macpherson contend that these theories gave birth to the notion of *possessive individualism*—a concept that defines the individual as the sole proprietor of their person and capacities, and especially their labour. This focus on the liberties and rights of the free, autonomous individual nurtured the paradigm of an individualistic market society, where men are at liberty to utilise themselves and their skills as they see fit.⁷³

In this section, I discuss J.S. Mill's contribution to the development of the notion of the liberal self. Mill's work, *On Liberty*, (1859) establishes him as one of the most fervent advocates for individual liberty in the liberal tradition. However, what sets Mill's conception of the individual apart from both his predecessors and successors is his embrace of *individuality* and rejection of atomistic individualism—a nuance that warrants careful examination. His perspective represents a pivotal shift in liberal thought, moving beyond the mere protection of individual rights to championing the cultivation of unique, flourishing individuals. His emphasis on individuality as a cornerstone of human development and societal progress marks a departure from the more calculating views of his predecessors. By exploring Mill's ideas, a richer, more dynamic understanding of the liberal self, one that values the realisation of human potential within the broader context of social harmony, is uncovered. I examine how Mill's conception of individuality

⁷³ Macpherson, C. B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp.13-14

intertwines with notions of freedom, self-development, and societal progress. This analysis reveals the intricate balance he strikes between individual autonomy and social responsibility, offering a more nuanced and compelling vision of liberalism.

Scholars widely recognise Mill's invaluable contributions to social, moral, and political philosophy. However, some express scepticism regarding the consistency and methodology of his work. This scepticism stems from Mill's apparent oscillation between utilitarianism and liberalism throughout his writings. Particularly controversial sections of his essay, *On Liberty*, seem to present conflicting ideas from his utilitarian and liberal perspectives, sparking debate among philosophers and political theorists. Mill's father had envisioned his son continuing Bentham's efforts to transform the legal system, and adopting utilitarian ideas was crucial for this purpose. Indeed, Mill initially embraced utilitarianism wholeheartedly. However, several pivotal factors—including his emotional breakdown in 1825, his introduction to German Romantic thought, and his relationship with Harriet Taylor—catalysed a critical re-evaluation of many aspects of Benthamite utilitarianism. These experiences prompted him to reassess and refine his ideas about the theory, leading to a more nuanced and complex philosophical stance. Mill's intellectual journey reflects a broader tension within liberal thought: the challenge of reconciling individual liberty with collective well-being. His efforts to synthesise utilitarian principles with a robust defence of individual rights and freedoms represent a significant evolution in liberal philosophy. By grappling with the limitations of pure utilitarianism, he paved the way for a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between individual flourishing and societal progress.⁷⁴

The essay, *On Liberty*, densely argued, is regarded by many scholars as a declaration of individual freedom and rights. Its relevance has endured since its first publication in 1859. At its core, the work asserts that individual liberty should be fiercely protected, allowing individuals to

⁷⁴ Mill, J.S. (2003). *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*. Edited by Mary Warnock. Blackwell publishing. pp., 3,9

freely choose their own ends and the means to pursue them, free from social control or coercion—unless such intervention is absolutely necessary to prevent harm to others. Mill eloquently states:

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.⁷⁵

This principle, commonly known as the *Harm Principle* or “no coercion save to prevent harm to others,” posits that individual sovereignty can only be overridden when another individual’s liberty is at risk. Mill boldly claims that this principle is “entitled to govern *absolutely* the dealings of society.” This assertion has elicited mixed reactions from critics, who question the definition of harm and the appropriate circumstances for limiting one’s freedom. Some have even argued that in *On Liberty*, Mill departs from his utilitarian foundations by proposing a principle other than utility as *absolute*.

Alan Ryan (1998) offers a compelling counterargument, contending that Mill remained faithful to his utilitarian ideas and was acutely aware of the risks inherent in proposing any principle other than utility as absolute. Ryan argues that Mill adeptly defends his utilitarian stance by justifying freedom through its utility:

Mill himself was aware that it was dangerous for a utilitarian to offer any other principle than utility as *entitled to govern absolutely* the dealings of society with its members.

Utilitarians prided themselves on having reduced morality to principle: ethics had been

⁷⁵ Mill, J.S. pp. 94-95

rationalised when the principle of utility justified the everyday morality that utilitarians accepted and the non-everyday morality with which they wished to improve everyday morality. The status of any other principle was thus a delicate matter. Mill was ready with his answer. The individual's sovereignty over him- or herself was not based on natural right; it was derived from utility.⁷⁶

Ryan's interpretation suggests a crucial distinction in Mill's doctrine: individual liberty and rights are not to be understood as natural rights, as Hobbes and Locke believed. Instead, they are conceptualised with reference to man's utility and place in society. Consequently, freedom becomes instrumental in achieving the greatest happiness for the greatest number. This interpretation reveals a nuanced aspect of Mill's philosophy: what matters is not freedom *per se*, but how one uses their freedom. In Mill's framework, freedom is predicated not on natural rights but on the individual's choice and responsibility to develop themselves positively. This perspective offers a more dynamic and socially oriented conception of liberty than the atomistic individualism of earlier liberal thinkers. Nevertheless, if freedom is to be understood in this framework that Ryan suggests, then what is the value of individual freedom itself?

Robert Ladenson (1977) reinforces this utilitarian reading, arguing that Mill emphasises the critical importance of nurturing individual qualities that foster unique characters, ultimately benefiting society as a whole. This perspective suggests that Mill's prioritisation of individual freedom does not compromise but rather enhances the overall happiness of society. If we accept Ladenson's interpretation of Mill's utilitarianism, we can view freedom as instrumental—a means to achieve general welfare through individual development. This approach posits that personal growth and societal benefit are intrinsically linked. Whilst Mill was not a functionalist *per se*, his concept of the self-developed individual as a societal asset bears a resemblance to functionalist

⁷⁶ Ryan, A. (1998). Mill in a Liberal Landscape. In J. Skorupski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy, pp. 497-540). Cambridge University Press. p.501

sociological perspectives.⁷⁷ Mill strives to achieve societal prosperity by vigorously defending individual freedoms and rights, viewing these as essential conditions for personal flourishing. In turn, this individual development contributes to the promotion of general welfare, creating a virtuous cycle of personal and societal growth.

However, not all scholars accept this strictly utilitarian reading of Mill's philosophy. John Gray (1981) argues that whilst Mill never abandoned utilitarianism, his approach was revisionary rather than strictly Benthamite. This nuanced view acknowledges Mill's evolution within the utilitarian framework. Both Mill and Bentham concur that the utility principle is fundamental in ensuring optimal societal outcomes, yet their conceptions of human nature diverge significantly. Bentham's view of humanity is relatively simplistic, perceiving individuals as primarily driven by the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. In contrast, Mill's perspective, profoundly influenced by Romanticism, introduces a more nuanced understanding of human motivation and development. His distinction between higher and lower pleasures is crucial to his revisionary utilitarianism. This hierarchy of pleasures, according to Mill, serves as an indicator of an individual's self-development and moral character. Such a perspective allows for a more sophisticated understanding of human flourishing than Bentham's hedonistic calculus. If Mill had adhered strictly to Bentham's doctrine without these crucial modifications, it would have been challenging to reconcile the defence of individual liberty with the promotion of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Bentham's approach, viewing happiness primarily as a

⁷⁷ The functionalist analogy of society as a human body—in which various institutions and agencies such as family, education, and media function as vital organs, each contributing to the healthy functioning of the whole system—provides a useful framework for understanding this aspect of Mill's thought. Just as a malfunctioning organ affects the entire body, an individual's failure to develop and contribute can impact the broader social fabric. For more on this sociological model, see Pope, W. (1975). Durkheim as a Functionalist. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 16(3), 361–379. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4105747>

collective achievement, risks undermining individual goals and pursuits in favour of aggregate pleasure.⁷⁸

In contrast, Mill's philosophy places great confidence in individual self-improvement as a catalyst for societal progress. He argues that mere conformity to societal values, without the capacity to challenge and refine existing institutions and standards, would inevitably lead to social stagnation. This insight forms the basis of his staunch defence of individual freedoms and rights, which he sees as essential preconditions for societal improvement. Mill's revisionary utilitarianism, therefore, creates space for individuals to develop and apply their unique qualities and skills. This personal growth, in his view, is not merely beneficial for the individual but contributes substantially to society's general welfare and happiness. Gray interprets this aspect of Mill's thought as transcending the narrow confines of Benthamite utilitarianism. Instead, Mill's revised utilitarianism incorporates a profound social dimension, recognising the intricate interplay between individual development and societal progress.

A third interpretative position offers a distinct perspective, primarily rooted in Mill's idea of self-development as *individuality*. Mill embraced the concept of individuality, advocating for individuals to cultivate their distinctive qualities and character. This cultivation, he argued, allows them to reach their highest potential and attain excellence:

Having said that individuality is the same thing as development, and that it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings, I might here close the argument: for what more or better can be said of any condition of human affairs than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best thing they can be? ⁷⁹

⁷⁸ For more on Utilitarianism see Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/> [accessed 04/12/2025]

⁷⁹ Mill, p.138

According to Mill, society should strive for self-development, or in other words, the cultivation of individuality, which can lead to personal growth and benefits for the community. His emphasis on self-development and pursuing men's excellence has caused scholars, such as Levi (1959), to believe that Mill has moved away from his utilitarianism and towards an explicitly Aristotelian moral philosophy. Levi contends that Mill's notion of individuality is, in essence, a form of self-invention or self-realisation, drawing parallels between Mill's concept of cultivating individuality and the Aristotelian ethic of human excellence.⁸⁰

However, Levi's argument, while intriguing, raises significant concerns. If Mill indeed adopts an Aristotelian perspective, it would imply particular views on the ideal life, potentially conflicting with his commitment to liberalism. Mill advocates for a liberal society where individuals have the freedom to choose their own goals. Simultaneously, the ideal of human excellence suggests striving for the best possible version of oneself, implying a specific conception of the good. This apparent tension begs the question: how can these two concepts be reconciled within Mill's philosophy?

Wendy Donner (2018) offers a different interpretation, viewing Mill's idea of "human beings arriving at the maturity of their faculties and using their own interpretation" as a form of radical egalitarianism. In this reading, the goal is for all individuals to have the opportunity to cultivate their individuality and become independent thinkers capable of evaluating established values and customs. Donner suggests that freedom, in this context, appears instrumental in providing the conditions necessary for individuals to develop and express their individuality. Importantly, her thesis diverges from the first position, which views freedom as a means to achieve a greater good in a utilitarian sense. Moreover, she disagrees with the notion that Mill presupposes an ideal of human excellence as an ultimate end. Instead, Donner argues that Mill's concept of individuality highlights two complementary components: individualism and sociality. In this

⁸⁰ Levi, A. W. (1959). *The Value of Freedom: Mill's Liberty* (1859-1959). *Ethics*, 70(1), 37–46.

view, Mill's individual is a self-developed, independent, and socially aware agent capable of evaluating and improving the society they participate in.⁸¹

Given that the individual serves as the starting point for any discourse within the liberal tradition, it is not surprising that liberalism has been accused of being a highly individualistic perspective. Robert Wolff (1968), for instance, characterises this view succinctly: "Liberalism views man as a rationally calculating maximiser of pleasure and minimiser of pain".⁸² Other philosophical perspectives, such as communitarianism, have objected to the liberal conception of the self, that depicts individuals as independent and detached from their social identities.

However, Mill's conception of the individual, while embracing the liberal view of individual sanctity and rights, defies characterisation as either individualistic or egoistic in the sense of these criticisms. He conceived man as a progressive being whose advancement depends on self-development. This self-development is seen as a dynamic process in which the individual actively participates, allowing distinctive human faculties to mature and individuality to emerge. Mill argues that only through the cultivation of individuality can humans truly flourish, benefiting both themselves and their community: "In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others".⁸³ Thus, individuality, in Mill's conception, does not refer to individuals indifferent to social affairs and the general good. Donner maintains that his emphasis on individual development has a deep social dimension, not seeking to isolate the individual from their social environment but rather enhancing this relationship.⁸⁴

Isaiah Berlin (2002) argues that of all Mill's ideas, what ensured his lasting fame was his view that what distinguishes humans from the rest of nature is the freedom to choose and to experiment.

⁸¹ Donner, W. (1991). *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Theory*. Cornell University Press. 7-9

⁸² Wolff, R.P. (1968). *The poverty of liberalism*. Boston: Beacon Press, p.141

⁸³ Mill, p.137

⁸⁴ Donner, W. (1991). *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Theory*. Cornell University Press. p.148

Berlin finds that pluralism emerges through the experimentation that Mill proposes. This pluralism can only thrive under the conditions Mill suggests: no coercion, freedom of speech and expression, and the ability of individuals to challenge established norms and customs. Freedom is essential for humans to have the autonomy to make their own decisions, pursue their goals, and thrive by creating or recreating themselves. Mill's doctrine about individuality, rather than an attempt to justify freedom by its utility, gives rise to the concept of pluralism.⁸⁵

In this section, I have discussed Mill's ideas on individual freedom, self-development, and individuality, presenting different arguments to consider fresh perspectives and reassess established ones. The question of whether Mill prioritises utility over freedom, or seeks utility through freedom, or advocates for freedom due to its utility remains a matter of scholarly debate. Similarly, whether his idea of individuality as human excellence aligns more with an Aristotelian perspective or a with a progressive liberal idea where everyone can reinvent themselves, continues to generate productive disagreement. What remains clear, however, is that Mill's emphasis on individuality and character development transcends simplistic categorisations:

It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it...[if great things were done] by automatons in human form—it would be a considerable loss to exchange for these automatons even the men and women who at present inhabit the more civilised parts of the world.⁸⁶

Mill was a romantic liberal with a vision ahead of his time. He aimed for a pluralist society that is just and well-organised, where everyone has equal opportunities to thrive, individually and collectively. According to Mill, the most significant aspect isn't what people can attain as self-

⁸⁵ Berlin I. Hardy H. & Harris I. (2002). *Liberty: incorporating four essays on liberty*. (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. pp. 250-251

⁸⁶ Mill, p.134

developed individuals, but the character and qualities they develop whilst becoming who they are.

2.5 Rawls' idea of Justice as Fairness: The Political and Private individual

Mill's ideas on individual liberty and rights, including his concept of individuality as self-development as well as his advocacy for women's rights and equality, were innovative for Victorian England. His doctrine contributed significantly to the development of moral and political philosophy and as many scholars have noted, few new concepts or themes emerged in political philosophy following Mill's contributions. This philosophical stasis was disrupted in the late 20th century by John Rawls with his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls' work reignited debates on fundamental themes such as justice, equality, the individual, society, and the state.

In this section I provide a focused examination of Rawls' theory of justice, concentrating specifically on concepts related to the understanding of the liberal self. I discuss some of his key ideas such as the *original position*, the *veil of ignorance*, and the *priority of liberty*. My aim is to explore how these Rawlsian concepts contribute to our understanding of the individual in relation to society and the state, and how they build upon or challenge earlier notions of liberty and individuality. Crucially, I examine Rawls' distinction between political and comprehensive liberalism, and the resulting separation of the political and private individual—a distinction that raises important questions about the relationship between public reason and private morality, questions I return to in Chapter 7.

From the late 19th century onwards, utilitarianism dominated political philosophy. This theory posited that a just society should organise its institutions and public offices to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. However, this approach raises significant ethical concerns. For instance, if human trafficking were to hypothetically bring about the greatest happiness to the majority in society, utilitarianism might deem it acceptable. This glaring issue

highlights a fundamental flaw in utilitarian thinking. Critics, therefore, argue that utilitarianism fails to adequately account for individual rights, a cornerstone of liberal theories. These theories assert that all individuals possess an inviolability, and certain rights should never be infringed upon, regardless of potential societal benefits. Rawls, recognising this shortcoming, proposed a radically different model for society, one in which justice, not aggregate happiness, serves as the foundation for social institutions:

Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory, however elegant and economical, must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise, laws and institutions, no matter how efficient and well-arranged, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust. Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason, justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the largest sum of advantages enjoyed by many.⁸⁷

The question that arises: how do we organise society so that social institutions and laws are structured and function according to the principle of justice? What precisely constitutes justice and fairness? To address these fundamental issues, Rawls draws inspiration from the social contract theories of philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. Building upon the concept of a hypothetical state of nature, where individuals reach mutual agreements based on self-interest to form a civilized society, Rawls proposes a thought experiment. He suggests that for a social contract to be truly just, all members of society must convene in an *original position* to establish a set of principles which ensures fair and equal opportunities for success for everyone. He articulates the necessity of these principles:

⁸⁷ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice* Belknap Press. pp. 3-4 (Original work published in 1971)

A set of principles is required for choosing among the various social arrangements which determine this division of advantages and for underwriting an agreement on the proper distributive shares. These principles are the principles of social justice: they provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation.⁸⁸

But how can it be guaranteed that these principles are just? To ensure these principles are indeed just, Rawls introduces his *Main Idea*:

[...]the guiding idea is that the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of an original agreement. They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association. These principles are to regulate all further agreements; they specify the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into and the forms of government that can be established. This way of regarding the principles of justice I shall call justice as fairness.⁸⁹

In essence, Rawls proposes that rational individuals should determine what is just in the same manner that one understands their own good after careful reflection. These principles would then assign fundamental rights and duties to individuals in society. Rawls distils his general conception of justice into the formulation that “all social values-liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect-are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored.”⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice* Belknap Press. p.4

⁸⁹ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice* Belknap Press. p.11

⁹⁰ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice* Belknap Press. p.62

However, a crucial question arises: if these principles are to be agreed upon by rational and free individuals, won't each person decide based on what works best for them? Rawls addresses this concern by introducing the controversial concept of the *veil of ignorance*. He explains:

In justice as fairness, the original position of equality corresponds to the state of nature in the traditional theory of the social contract [...]. Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances. Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favor his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain.⁹¹

This *veil of ignorance* ensures that principles organising a just society are chosen when individuals are unaware of their potential societal position. For instance, one cannot advocate for high taxes on the rich simply because they are poor, as behind this veil, they don't know their future place in society.

In the *original position*, all parties are equal, possessing the same rights in decision-making and principle selection. Rawls conceives them as "moral persons, as creatures having a conception of the good, and they are capable of a sense of justice." He posits that two key principles of justice would emerge from this original position:

⁹¹ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice*. Belknap Press, p.12

First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.

Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.⁹²

The first principle applies to society's constitutional structures, encompassing basic citizen liberties such as political liberty, freedom of speech and assembly, liberty of conscience and thought, personal freedom, property rights, and protection from arbitrary arrest. In other words, this principle grants equal rights to all citizens.⁹³

The second principle of justice consists of two parts. The first part of the principle, which Rawls calls the "difference principle", requires that any inequalities of wealth and income in society can only be allowed if they are to benefit everyone, especially the worst-off members of society. If this principle is satisfied, citizens are reassured that the economic system works in a way that benefits everyone and that none gets richer just because their natural endowment or inheritance allows them to do so. The principle of just distribution and wealth is therefore satisfied.⁹⁴

Rawls calls the second part of the principle the *liberal principle of fair equality of opportunity*. According to the principle, citizens of the same talents and willing to apply them to work should have an equal opportunity to do so. This means that all public institutions should provide fair and equal opportunity by being accessible and open to all citizens regardless of their class background or any other arbitrary factor. In other words, someone born in poverty should have the same educational and economic opportunities as someone born rich. In this way, the income distribution

⁹² Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice*. Belknap Press, p.60

⁹³ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice*. Belknap Press, §11

⁹⁴ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice*. Belknap Press. §13-§14

of a profession, for example, would be just because the opportunity to access the profession was based on fair procedures and everyone had an equal opportunity to access it. He illustrates this claim by using an example of gambling:

If a number of persons engage in a series of fair bets, the distribution of cash after the last bet is fair, or at least not unfair, whatever this distribution is. I assume here that fair bets are those having a zero expectation of gain, that the bets are made voluntarily, that no one cheats, and so on. The betting procedure is fair and freely entered into under conditions that are fair. Thus the background circumstances define a fair procedure. Now any distribution of cash summing to the initial stock held by all individuals could result from a series of fair bets. In this sense all of these particular distributions are equally fair.⁹⁵

Rawls suggests therefore, that in justice as fairness, society is organised on pure procedural justice, where fair procedures ensure a just result.

The final formulation of the principles of justice is found in the paragraph “Further cases of priority” (§46) of his essay and is as follows:

First Principle: Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
(a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and
(b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.⁹⁶

Rawls argues that the principles of justice are to be ranked in lexical order where the principle of liberty has priority over the second principle and the principle of fair opportunity has

⁹⁵ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice*. Belknap Press, p.86

⁹⁶ Rawls, J. (2005). *Political liberalism* (Expanded ed). Columbia University Press. p.302

priority over the difference principle. Therefore, according to Rawls, liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty.⁹⁷ By doing so, Rawls demonstrates what is at the core of the doctrine of liberalism; the priority of individual liberty and rights. Although *justice as fairness* requires that social and economic inequalities shouldn't exist in a just society, these cannot be reduced at the cost of liberty; only liberty can restrict liberty.

This formulation of the priority of liberty, however, raised critical questions. H.L.A. Hart (1973) presents a compelling critique of Rawls' theory, arguing that Rawls fails to provide adequate criteria for adjudicating between conflicting basic liberties. Hart contends that Rawls' claim of liberty's primacy applies specifically to his conception of liberty within *justice as fairness*, rather than to his initial, more general conception of justice. The central problem, as Hart identifies it, is that Rawls offers a specific set of basic liberties as worthy of protection whilst excluding other important social values which may conflict with these basic liberties.

To defend his argument for restricting liberty for the sake of liberty, Rawls provides the example of rules of order in debate. He argues that whilst such rules might limit a particular freedom (speaking at will), they ultimately protect and enhance greater liberty as a whole.⁹⁸ However, Hart finds this example overly simplistic and argues it cannot be generalised to justify all restrictions on liberty for liberty's sake. He posits that when basic liberties conflict, various resolutions will align with the interests of different rational persons, as individuals assign different relative values to these conflicting liberties.

But again, these natural duties chosen from behind the veil of ignorance would only account for very obvious cases where the benefits of the restrictions would, for all rational men, plainly outweigh the burdens. This will not help where divergent choices could reasonably

⁹⁷ Rawls, J. (2005). *Political liberalism* (Expanded ed). Columbia University Press. p.302

⁹⁸ Rawls, J. (2005). *A Theory of Justice*. Belknap Press. p.203

be made by different individuals in the light of their different interests, and it seems to me that this will very often be the case.⁹⁹

According to Hart, the parties in the *original position* lack sufficient information to decide how to rank conflicting liberties when reasonable people might value them differently. For instance, some individuals might prioritise freedom of speech over privacy, whilst others might take the opposite view. The problem, therefore, is that Rawls' framework provides no clear criterion for resolving such conflicts, despite his insistence that only liberty can restrict liberty. Furthermore, Rawls does not clarify whether basic liberties can be restricted when they might infringe upon what he calls "natural duties"—duties such as not harming others or causing unnecessary suffering. His theory of *justice as fairness* appears too rigid in excluding restrictions that do not limit liberty for liberty's sake. If he were to make adjustments to include other moral principles beyond the priority of liberty, it would potentially undermine the liberal essence of his theory. Hart's critique thus exposes a fundamental tension in Rawls' framework: the difficulty of maintaining absolute priority of liberty whilst acknowledging that liberties inevitably conflict and that citizens possess diverse values and priorities.

In *Political Liberalism*, a collection of essays published after *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls offers a revised version of the principles of justice and addresses some of Hart's concerns. Whilst in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls assigns the agreement over basic liberties to equal, rational persons motivated by self-interest, *Political Liberalism* presents a different account of personhood. This shift alters the citizens' motivation for acknowledging and endorsing the priority of basic liberties. Citizens now recognise this priority because it secures conditions for developing what Rawls calls the *two moral powers*. These moral powers constitute the citizens of a well-ordered society, and basic

⁹⁹ Hart H.L.A., (1973) In Daniels, N. (1989), *Reading Rawls: Critical Studies on Rawls' 'A Theory of Justice.'* Stanford University Press, p.246

liberties secure the conditions for their development. This is why equal, reasonable, and rational citizens will agree on them.

Rawls acknowledges that basic liberties inevitably conflict and that none are absolute. He clarifies that he does not prioritise liberty for its intrinsic value, but for its instrumental purpose in securing the conditions for citizens' moral powers. By agreeing on a specific set of basic liberties and acknowledging none are absolute, Rawls distinguishes between what he calls *political liberties* and *personal liberties*. Political liberties play an instrumental role in enabling citizens to participate in democratic self-governance and to develop their moral capacities, whilst personal liberties (such as liberty of conscience) have worth within what Rawls calls *comprehensive doctrines*. He states:

[...] the equal basic liberties as specified as follows: freedom of thought and liberty of conscience; the political liberties of freedom of association, as well as the freedoms specified by the liberty and integrity of the person; and finally, the rights and liberties covered by the rule of law. No priority is assigned to liberty as such as if the exercise of something called 'liberty' has a preeminent value and is the main if not the sole end of political and social justice.¹⁰⁰

This clarification is significant because it means that in the *original position*, the citizens can recognise and agree on the set of basic liberties which do not relate to any specific conception of the good or an ideal of personal life but can guarantee fair terms for social cooperation. However, the question of how to decide among conflicting liberties remains. Even if the set of basic liberties provides the framework for social cooperation, the absence of clear criteria for resolving conflicts means that disagreements are bound to occur. Rawls avoids providing definitive criteria based on which citizens can make arrangements for social cooperation and adjudicate between competing liberties. In doing so, he protects the citizens' right to pursue their own ends, but he also leaves

¹⁰⁰ Rawls, J. (2005). *Political liberalism* (Expanded ed). Columbia University Press, pp. 291-292

space for fundamental disagreements which potentially threaten his vision of a just, well-ordered society.

Unlike his predecessors such as Locke, Rousseau and Mill, whose liberal doctrines he identifies as *comprehensive*, Rawls argues that the idea of *justice as fairness* is a purely political doctrine. A comprehensive doctrine, whether liberal or otherwise, offers a complete worldview encompassing metaphysical, epistemological, and moral claims about the nature of persons, the good life, and ultimate values. Comprehensive liberalism, in Rawls' account, extends liberal principles beyond the political sphere to govern all aspects of life, including personal morality, religion, and philosophy. Political liberalism, by contrast, deliberately limits its scope to the political domain—to the basic structure of society and the principles governing major social institutions. Rawls argues that political philosophy should not engage with metaphysical or moral claims about the nature of the good life, human flourishing, or ultimate purposes.

In his essay *Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical* (1985), Rawls explains that this separation is essential if *justice as fairness* is to secure liberty whilst acknowledging the fact of reasonable pluralism in modern democratic societies. Citizens hold diverse and often incompatible comprehensive doctrines—religious, philosophical, and moral views about the good life. If the state were to endorse or impose any particular comprehensive doctrine, even a liberal one, it would violate citizens' liberty and fail to respect them as free and equal persons.

The separation between political and comprehensive liberalism thus serves a specific purpose: to enable citizens with fundamentally different worldviews to agree on principles of justice that can regulate their common life together. Values concerned with specific conceptions of the good—whether derived from religious doctrine, philosophical conviction, or moral tradition—should not be permitted to determine the principles governing basic political institutions, because doing so would privilege some citizens' comprehensive views over others and thereby restrict

liberty. Instead, political liberalism proposes that citizens bracket their comprehensive doctrines when engaging in public reason about constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice.

Rawls does not deny that there is a moral component to his idea of *justice as fairness*. The two moral powers which constitute the ideal citizen—the capacity for a sense of justice and the capacity for a conception of the good—provide this element of morality in Rawls' doctrine. The individual is conceived as free and rational with these two capacities. But this should not be understood as a comprehensive moral doctrine that dictates what citizens should value or how they should live; rather, it applies merely to the political aspect of citizenship. Rawls' citizens are autonomous in a specifically political sense, and this is what makes equality and freedom possible in the conception of *justice as fairness*. They value their freedom because it provides them with the capacity to form and revise their own conceptions of the good and to pursue their own ends. At the same time, they share a commitment to the political value of justice and acknowledge their obligations as citizens within a fair system of social cooperation.¹⁰¹

This separation gives rise to what can be understood as a division between the political individual and the private individual. Rawls makes this explicit when he discusses citizens' "non-public identity":

Citizens may have, and normally do have at any given time, affections, devotions, and loyalties that they believe they would not, and indeed could and should not, stand apart from and objectively evaluate from the point of view of their purely rational good. They may regard it as simply unthinkable to view themselves apart from certain religious, philosophical, and moral convictions, or from certain enduring attachments and loyalties. These convictions and attachments are part of what we may call their "non-public identity."¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Rawls, J. (1985). Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 14(3), 223–251. Section III.

¹⁰² Rawls, J. (1985). Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 14(3), 223–251. p. 241

This division is, for Rawls, an essential component of political liberalism. The state should not impose any conceptions of the good on its citizens but must allow them to freely choose and pursue their own ends. Citizens must be free to hold their own religious beliefs, philosophical convictions, and moral commitments without state interference, so long as these comprehensive views remain compatible with the political principles of justice. Rawls maintains that in political liberalism, "the right is prior to the good"—that is, principles of justice (the right) take priority over any particular conception of the good life. The just framework enables citizens to pursue diverse conceptions of the good, but no conception of the good can justify violations of justice or the infringement of basic liberties.

However, this separation between the political and the private individual has steered a series of objections and debates between liberal and communitarian theorists. On the one hand, liberals argue for the importance of keeping any conceptions of the good life outside of the concern of the public domain in order to secure freedom. On the other hand, communitarians accuse the liberals that by refusing to invite moral arguments and questions about the good life into the public sphere, they fail to engage the virtues and qualities of the character that individuals possess, which are essential for the composition of a healthy society.

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls offers a framework for understanding *justice as fairness*; justice should be the outcome of fair procedures in social institutions and society. In his theory, individual freedom is a fundamental aspect of a just society, derived from the principle of *justice as fairness* in that only a just society can deliver individual liberty and rights. The role of the institutions of a just society is to protect individual rights and to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to pursue their ends. Rawls' later work, particularly *Political Liberalism*, develops the crucial separation between political and comprehensive liberalism, giving rise to a conception of the

individual as divided between a public, political identity and a private identity rooted in comprehensive doctrines. This division, whilst intended to secure liberty and enable cooperation amidst pluralism, raises important questions about the coherence of the liberal self and the foundations of political community—questions that animate ongoing debates in political philosophy and that I examine further in subsequent chapters.

2.6 Summary and Final Reflections

This chapter has traced the development of liberal ideas of the self from Hobbes's and Locke's social contract theories, through Mill's defence of individuality, to Rawls's political liberalism. Across these thinkers, different interpretations of individual freedom and rights emerge, each contributing to the formation of the modern liberal self. Drawing on Macpherson, I have shown how Hobbes and Locke, despite their differences, both contribute to the notion of *possessive individualism* by presenting the individual as self-interested and as the proprietor of himself. In their accounts, freedom becomes something akin to a commodity—something that can be exchanged, reinforcing an understanding of liberty that closely resembles *economic freedom*.

Mill, in contrast, is not concerned with proprietorship or the pursuit of power. His focus lies on individuality understood as self-development. For Mill, individual freedom consists in the ability to pursue one's own ends and become the best version of oneself. Yet his passionate advocacy of individuality sits in tension with utilitarianism, which subordinates personal preference to the maximisation of overall happiness. This tension explains the divide among scholars. Ryan and Grey defend Mill's consistency with utilitarianism, arguing that the cultivation of individuality ultimately supports general welfare. Others, such as Levi, maintain that *On Liberty* marks a departure from utilitarianism and reflects an Aristotelian ideal of human excellence. Donner highlights the difficulty of reconciling such an Aristotelian outlook, which assumes a substantive account of human ends, with Mill's insistence on liberty and individual choice.

The chapter concluded with Rawls's account of individual rights and freedom in *A Theory of Justice*, where he distinguishes between citizens' public and private identities. This distinction underpins his contribution to the liberal–communitarian debate, raising questions about the role of moral arguments and conceptions of the good within the public sphere.

Tracing these developments reveals a recurring commitment within liberal thought to viewing individuals as independent and autonomous, even as the basis of freedom is interpreted differently. Hobbes portrays human beings as fundamentally egoistic calculators concerned with their own interest, seeking security and superiority over others. This self-centred individual finds later expression in possessive individualism, a defining characteristic of market societies.

For Locke, freedom rests on natural rights. The individual owns his labour and its products and is therefore the proprietor of himself. The consequence is that freedom becomes commodified in the same way labour can be exchanged. Freedom is thereby expressed as economic freedom—the right to engage freely in market transactions—which, in turn, justifies the unlimited appropriation of resources.

Such an interpretation of freedom has come to characterise Western liberal democracies, alongside political liberties, because these societies created the institutional space for market economies to flourish. Yet economic freedom is not exclusive to liberal democracies: autocracies can sustain robust markets while suppressing political liberties. China, for instance, affords substantial opportunities for economic exchange while restricting rights such as freedom of speech and expression. Economic liberty travels easily across political regimes; political liberty does not.

Against this backdrop, Mill's account of freedom as self-development offers a contrasting model. He regards individuality as the ideal of human excellence and believes that self-expression and experimentation contribute to social progress. The right to free speech and expression

provides the conditions under which diverse and even disruptive ideas can emerge—conditions essential for social improvement.

Distinguishing between these interpretations of freedom is crucial, as they have shaped the foundational principles of individual rights in democratic societies. Yet understanding freedom primarily in economic terms raises significant difficulties, especially in relation to environmental attitudes and the harms they perpetuate. What follows from Locke's notion of unlimited appropriation? How does this idea contribute to contemporary environmental crises? And is economic freedom inherently problematic when considering our environmental responsibilities?

The preceding analysis has traced how liberal thought progressively models the self as autonomous, rights-bearing, and detachable from constitutive communities. This trajectory culminates in the economic man of libertarian and neoliberal thought — a self whose freedom is primarily conceived as economic freedom. It is important to note at this stage, however, that what is progressively evacuated in these accounts is not only a rich conception of individual agency but also a substantive understanding of political community and moral character. When liberal theory defines the individual as prior to its ends and grounds freedom in self-ownership and property rights, it simultaneously hollows out the political — reducing citizenship to the protection of private rights — the moral — leaving virtue and the common good without adequate philosophical grounding — and the social, dissolving the constitutive bonds of community, tradition, and place through which genuine civic responsibility is formed. Adrian Pabst (2025) identifies this as a self-contradictory process operating simultaneously on five interconnected levels: philosophy, anthropology, ethics, politics, and economics.¹⁰³ The thesis diagnoses this triple impoverishment in its diagnostic chapters, before developing in Part II the communitarian and virtue-ethical

¹⁰³ Pabst, A. (2025). The New Era: What Comes After the Self-Erosion of Liberalism. *Telos*, 2025(212), 38–59. p.42

resources through which a more adequate account of the self — one capable of grounding genuine environmental and civic responsibility — can be constructed.

Chapter 3

Possessive Individualism: Macpherson's Critique of the Liberal Self and Its Contemporary Relevance

3.1 Introduction

The pervasive influence of market forces and the ascendancy of capitalist societies, particularly in Western liberal democracies, necessitate a critical examination of the philosophical underpinnings that shape our understanding of individualism and freedom. In this context, C. B. Macpherson's concept of *possessive individualism* assumes central importance, offering a lens through which to analyse the relationship between economic systems and political philosophy. His work illuminates and challenges the individualistic and market-oriented aspects of classical liberal theories, particularly those of Hobbes and Locke.

As Philip Hansen (2015) argues, Macpherson's overarching project was not to undermine liberalism but to reconcile liberal ideals with Marxist critiques of capitalism. By synthesising concepts from liberalism and socialism, he sought to enhance liberal democratic theory, emphasising its humanistic and egalitarian elements while questioning its individualistic and market-driven tendencies. At the heart of Macpherson's critique lies the concept of *possessive individualism*, which serves as a framework for understanding how social practices and institutions are shaped by individual desires, needs, and objectives. This concept not only identifies a central theme in classical liberalism but also provides a basis for contrasting the ideals of liberal economic individualism with the realities of capitalist society.

Macpherson's work has, however, attracted criticism from different ideological perspectives. Liberal critics contend that his theory of possessive individualism oversimplifies the rich tradition of classical liberalism, reducing thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke to mere advocates of capitalist market society and obscuring their broader contributions to ideas of

individual freedom and rights. Proponents of economic liberalism maintain that private property accords with human nature and guarantees freedom. Conversely, communitarian theorists argue that Macpherson reduces human behaviour to economic imperatives, neglecting non-economic motivations and the significance of community and shared values.

This chapter explores the significance and implications of *possessive individualism* for shaping liberal conceptions of the self. By examining Macpherson's contributions and engaging with his critics, it seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the ongoing relevance of possessive individualism to debates about individual freedom, market society, and the moral and political status of the liberal self.

3.2 The Hobbesian Paradigm: Power, Freedom, and the Possessive Market Society

According to Macpherson (1962), Hobbes's theory of human nature and the social contract offers one of the most precise depictions of the underlying tensions within society. In Hobbes's account, key themes—*self-interest*, *power*, *individual freedom*, and *security*—are in constant tension, and it is from their interplay that his theory of political obligation emerges. By analysing the relations between these themes, Macpherson develops his own theory of possessive individualism and the *possessive market society*. He argues that the tensions identified by Hobbes are characteristic of liberal societies, and that Hobbes captures them with unusual clarity.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes (1651/1968) places power at the centre of his philosophy. In chapter 10, he begins with an apparently neutral definition of power as the capacity to secure future apparent goods. However, in the subsequent discussion he maintains that individuals are driven by a limitless desire to accumulate power over others, a desire that persists until death. This development follows his distinction between *natural power* and *instrumental power*. Natural power consists in an individual's inherent faculties and capacities. Instrumental powers, by contrast, include wealth, reputation, friendships, and good fortune, and these can be accumulated over time. The acquisition of instrumental power enables individuals to acquire still more power, making

power essentially relational: one person's power is defined in terms of its superiority to another's. Individuals are thus compelled to maximise the power they can command while resisting similar efforts by others. Power, value, and identity become intertwined in a continuous struggle.¹⁰⁴

To sustain their present well-being, individuals must acquire more power, and Hobbes effectively defines acquired power as the capacity to command the services of other people. This dynamic is transformed when a sovereign political authority is instituted, in contrast to the state of nature in which no such authority exists. Macpherson highlights the centrality of power in Hobbes's thought and the implications of this conception for understanding the possessive nature of human behaviour in liberal societies.

A critical insight that Macpherson draws from Hobbes is that *instrumental power* operates as something that can be accumulated, exchanged, and converted, much like a commodity in a market. Individuals seek to appropriate the powers of others while resisting reciprocal claims. This, Macpherson argues, leads to the idea of a *possessive market society*: a social order akin to a modern capitalist market in which individuals, understood as self-moving beings driven by desire and aversion, compete for advantage. In such a society, power and value are closely linked, and the worth of individuals is measured by the price of their power. As possessive market societies develop, class divisions emerge between owners and non-owners of productive resources, reinforcing inequalities in power and dependency.¹⁰⁵

3.2.1 The Freedom Paradox: Autonomy and Entrapment in Possessive Individualism

Hansen (2015) notes that Macpherson's analysis reveals a paradox at the heart of possessive individualism: individuals are portrayed as both autonomous and constrained by the social and political structures that arise from market relations.

¹⁰⁴ Hobbes T. (1968), *Leviathan*, (C.B. Macpherson Ed.). Penguin Publishers, p.161. (Original work published in 1651)

¹⁰⁵ Hobbes T. pp.11-12

In Hobbes's state of nature, individuals are autonomous agents motivated by self-interest and a desire for power. When they enter civil society, this basic identity remains intact, but the context changes. Individuals consent to restrict certain liberties and rights in exchange for protection and the prospect of a more secure and comfortable life. The resulting framework, which can be interpreted as a model of market society, provides individuals with a kind of freedom, but this freedom is conditional upon their continued participation in the system. To depart from civil society is to risk falling back into the insecurity of the state of nature, where one's freedom and survival are constantly threatened by the arbitrary power of others.

Within civil society, individuals enjoy a distinctive kind of freedom. The sovereign assumes responsibility for maintaining order and protecting their powers, so they are no longer engaged in a constant struggle for survival. Yet this freedom is also constraining. Individuals remain embedded in a competitive social order in which they must constantly navigate relations of power and exchange. Their autonomy is exercised within and through these structures rather than outside them.

The paradox of freedom in possessive individualism, as understood by Macpherson, lies in this double character: individuals are formally free and equal as bearers of rights, yet materially constrained by the requirements of a society organised around market relations and competition for power.¹⁰⁶

3.2.2 Synthesising Hobbes: The Interplay of Power and Liberty in Market Society

For Macpherson (1962), Hobbes's account of human motivation provides the basis for a theory of political obligation that arises from interactions among individuals driven by their

¹⁰⁶ Hansen, P. B. (2015). *Reconsidering C.B. Macpherson: From possessive individualism to democratic theory and beyond*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p.38

desires and aversions. Political order is justified insofar as it enables individuals to pursue what Hobbes famously calls “peace and commodious living”.

Hobbes is, in this sense, an uncompromising individualist. His philosophy rests on an atomistic conception of human beings, according to which freedom is understood as the maximisation of individual motion unobstructed by others. The primary role of political and social institutions is to secure conditions under which these self-contained individuals can pursue their aims. Within a possessive individualist framework, freedom increasingly comes to resemble a form of property: it is tied to the ownership of one’s person and capacities, and to independence from the will of others.¹⁰⁷ Society is then conceived as an aggregation of proprietors, each seeking to secure and expand their own position. Moral values are closely aligned with market values, and civil society is tasked with safeguarding property and regulating exchange.

Yet, in practice, individuals are interdependent. They rely on a web of exchange relations that extends far beyond the simple trading of goods. The need for orderly exchanges and stable property rights binds individuals to the structures of political society even as they strive to avoid dependence on others. This tension—between the ideal of independence and the reality of interdependence—stands at the core of the paradox of freedom in possessive individualism.

Macpherson’s interpretation of Hobbes thus highlights the intimate connection between individualism, freedom, and dependency in market society. Hobbes provides, in his view, the foundational framework for the emergence of a possessive market order. Nevertheless, it is Locke who, according to Macpherson, extends and consolidates these ideas, establishing possessive individualism as a central and enduring assumption within the liberal tradition.

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that while commodities initially appear to possess inherent properties, their objectivity as commodities emerges only within the context of exchange, a social relationship among producers. In other words, a commodity is intertwined with social content and acquires value within that system of exchange, thus within market societies.

3.3 Locke's Natural Law and Unlimited Appropriation: Foundations of Possessive Individualism

3.3.1 Labour as Moral Imperative: Locke's Theory of Appropriation

Locke maintains that the earth was bestowed by God upon humanity collectively for their sustenance. However, the value and functionality of land as a means of sustenance arise only when individuals cultivate it. By cultivating land, individuals mix their labour with natural resources and thereby acquire an exclusive right to what is produced. Labour becomes an extension of self-ownership and the foundation of property.

At the same time, Locke holds that natural law—grounded in reason and the duty to respect the rights of others—imposes certain limits on appropriation. Initially, individuals are entitled to extract resources from nature provided that “enough and as good” is left for others. Secondly, one may appropriate only as much as one can use before it spoils. Finally, individuals are restricted to what they can claim through their own hard work, since labour, when mixed with nature's resources, determines ownership. Macpherson (1962) refers to these as the sufficiency, spoilage, and labour limitations.¹⁰⁸

At first glance, these restrictions appear to keep the acquisition of wealth in check and suggest an underlying equality in ownership. However, Locke's subsequent reasoning clarifies that these limitations were not designed to prevent inequalities in wealth. He argues that land acquisition is contingent on the labour invested by industrious and rational individuals. Labour thus becomes the cornerstone of land ownership and the means by which resulting inequalities are justified. For Locke, private landownership is a moral duty grounded in natural law and directed towards serving humanity's needs. Exclusive rights over land incentivise cultivation and ensure productive use, in contrast to common land that remains unused or underused. Land utilisation in

¹⁰⁸ Locke, J. (1980), *Second Treatise of Government* (C.B. Macpherson Ed.), Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., ss 27,31. (Original work published in 1690)

this manner aligns with God's will for human sustenance, and labour is indispensable for fulfilling this purpose. The unequal distribution of land that emerges from this framework is therefore, on Locke's view, morally defensible.¹⁰⁹ Labour also underpins his well-known claim that "every man has a property in his own person and nobody has any right to but himself", linking self-ownership to the right to external property.¹¹⁰

Two of Locke's restrictions on appropriation are effectively set aside by this argument. The industrious use of land by rational individuals appears to satisfy the sufficiency condition and to define the labour limitation in ways that allow significant inequalities. The remaining question concerns the spoilage limitation: even if one has a right to all the land one can cultivate, how much can an individual actually use without waste?

Locke addresses this problem by introducing money. He argues that the use of money, accepted by common consent as a durable store of value, makes unlimited appropriation morally permissible. Individuals can now exchange perishable goods for money, thereby avoiding spoilage and enabling further accumulation. The transformation of land into capital through cultivation is pivotal here. Cultivated land yields a significantly greater product than uncultivated land, and Locke maintains that improving ten acres so that they produce the equivalent of one hundred acres in their natural state constitutes a generous contribution to humanity, maximising overall social welfare.¹¹¹

Building on Locke's analysis, Macpherson identifies a critical consequence: the incentive to accumulate land beyond immediate personal consumption can lead to the appropriation of all available land, leaving many without direct access to the means of subsistence. This appears to contradict the principles of natural law. However, Locke points to the dramatically increased

¹⁰⁹ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ss 34

¹¹⁰ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ss 27

¹¹¹ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ss 37,48

productivity of privately appropriated land, treated as capital, as the solution. This expanded productivity allows even those without land to achieve at least a minimal level of subsistence by selling their labour for wages.

In the remainder of this section, I draw on Macpherson's key observations to highlight Locke's role in shaping the concept of possessive individualism. In particular, I examine the tensions in Locke's treatment of individual freedom, moral obligation, unlimited appropriation, equality, and the emergence of class and capital.

3.3.2 Locke's Legacy: Critical Analysis of Natural Law and Possessive Individualism

Macpherson's reading of Locke brings into focus an important paradox. Locke defends the moral basis of unlimited accumulation, yet this defence coexists with the claim that every individual has a natural right to property because no one should be subject to the arbitrary will of another. Freedom from domination and the right to appropriate property are thus closely linked. Labour, believed to be ordained by God, is the foundation of property and a condition of individual freedom.

However, not everyone is able to acquire land through their labour. Macpherson argues that Locke's analysis implicitly introduces a differential class rationality and thereby establishes a class-based disparity in rights. The pivotal shift in Locke's thought occurs with the introduction of money, which alters the relationship between labour and appropriation. Prior to money, labour and appropriation were intertwined activities governed by the limits of natural law. With money, the possibility of unlimited accumulation transforms this relationship and leads to growing inequalities in landownership, leaving some without land to cultivate.

Under these transformed conditions, rational behaviour comes to mean the appropriation of land as capital, whether limited or unlimited. Appropriation now involves claiming the surplus product of others' labour, particularly those who lack land of their own. Consequently, not

everyone can appropriate land, and not everyone can be regarded as fully rational in Locke's sense. Members of the labouring class, lacking access to the means of production, are compelled to subordinate themselves to those who possess such means. This subordination deprives them of the ability to order their lives in accordance with the law of reason, undermining the natural rights that presuppose full proprietorship of their persons.

Locke further assumes that those whose only property is their labour are likely to struggle for mere subsistence, leaving them with little opportunity to reflect on matters beyond immediate survival. Appropriation and labour thus become distinct concepts: the former is associated with full rationality and ownership, while the latter is subordinated and dependent. Macpherson emphasises that this tension calls into question Locke's commitment to individual freedom.

It is also significant that Locke himself was a substantial landowner. Macpherson suggests that Locke tacitly assumes a right not only to one's own labour but also to the labour of others. If individuals own their capacities, they can sell or transfer them, and wage labour becomes integral to a commercial economy driven by capital accumulation. The *free* sale of one's labour in exchange for wages is thus linked to the introduction of money and to the inequalities that follow from it. Locke's theory therefore embodies a dual conception of individualism and freedom: individuals are free and equal in that they cannot be subjected to another's authority without their consent, yet they are also free as proprietors of their own persons and capacities, which they may be compelled to sell in order to survive.

In a possessive market society, the individual is understood as a proprietor of their own person. Their humanity is tied to their independence from social relations other than self-interested contractual exchanges, and society is conceived as a network of market relations. Macpherson argues that, in Locke's perspective, money functions as capital from the outset. This shifts the

conception of the free individual and blurs the lines between the initial and final stages of Locke's theory, reinforcing his role as the architect of possessive individualism.¹¹²

While Hobbes provides the initial framework for a market-oriented individualism, it is Locke's theory, according to Macpherson, that gives possessive individualism lasting social significance. The crucial difference is that Hobbes grounds political obligation in a materialistic view of human nature, whereas Locke bases it on natural law and on the rights and moral obligations that flow from it. By placing property at the centre of political obligation, Locke completes a structure that rests on foundations already laid by Hobbes.¹¹³

Locke's emphasis on private property marks a shift from the right to life to the right to ownership. As Macpherson suggests, the importance of private property in Locke's thought lies not only in material possession but also in the social relations it organises. Whereas property and labour once had a more explicitly social dimension, they are transformed into matters of individual proprietorship.¹¹⁴ This development strengthens the idea of individual rights in liberalism but simultaneously weakens notions of individual obligation towards society. Individuals increasingly view society as a mechanism for securing the conditions under which they can engage in market relations, with their freedom dependent on the ability to own and sell their labour.

The following section examines how the conception of the individual as proprietor of the self, with the freedom to dispose of oneself as one chooses, is taken up and elaborated in libertarian political theory.

¹¹² Macpherson, C. B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford University Press. p.275

¹¹³ Macpherson, C. B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford University Press. p.270

¹¹⁴ Macpherson, C. B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford University Press. p.221

3.4. Individual Liberty, Property Rights, and Self-Ownership: From Libertarianism to Neoliberalism

Although the previous chapters have examined the development of liberal thought through concepts such as *possessive individualism*, market freedom, and the construction of the rational, self-interested agent, the term *neoliberalism* has not yet been used explicitly. This has been deliberate: the earlier analysis traced the genealogy of these ideas without presupposing their later intensification. The present section marks the point at which this trajectory converges with the contemporary economic and political logic commonly identified as neoliberalism.

This shift is illuminated through an examination of libertarian theory in Robert Nozick, followed by the Austrian tradition's moral and epistemological justifications for market order in Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. Mises's defence of free markets as the ethically superior mechanism of social co-ordination, and Hayek's emphasis on the rule of law, dispersed knowledge, and the limits of state planning, together articulate the normative and structural foundations of neoliberal rationality. By situating these thinkers in relation to the earlier liberal framework, this section provides the bridge between classical liberal doctrines and the neoliberal paradigm that increasingly shapes modern Western political and economic life.

3.4.1 The Genesis of Libertarian Theory: Roots and Principles

The term *libertarian* is derived from the concept of *liberty*. As a political and philosophical theory, *libertarianism* traces its lineage to classical liberal thought and has evolved over several centuries. Its historical development can be understood in terms of a number of key phases.

The foundations of libertarianism were laid in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and the Enlightenment period, particularly in the works of classical liberals such as Locke who, as discussed in previous sections, championed the primacy of individual rights, limited government, and the rule of law. This era marked the initial articulation of ideas that would later influence

libertarian thought. In the nineteenth century, individualist anarchist thinkers such as Benjamin Tucker and Lysander Spooner emerged, emphasising voluntary exchange, free markets, and the rejection of coercive state authority. These early anarchists helped establish several of the core principles that libertarianism would later develop.

The twentieth century witnessed a closer integration of libertarian ideas with Austrian economic thought, notably in the work of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. Their emphasis on free-market capitalism, individual entrepreneurship, and the *spontaneous order* of the market became central to libertarian economic philosophy. In the mid-twentieth century, libertarianism experienced a further resurgence, partly driven by the writings of Ayn Rand, whose philosophy of *Objectivism*, grounded in individual rational self-interest, contributed to the intellectual landscape in which libertarian ideas circulated.¹¹⁵

The latter half of the twentieth century saw the consolidation of libertarian ideas into a more cohesive political movement. Thinkers such as Murray Rothbard and Robert Nozick provided distinctive libertarian perspectives on rights, state authority, and distributive justice. Politically, the founding of the Libertarian Party in the United States in 1971 gave these ideas a more explicit organisational form. In recent decades, libertarianism has continued to influence political discourse, supported by think tanks such as the Cato Institute in the United States. In the sphere of contemporary philosophical debate, scholars such as Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi have produced a substantial body of work that develops and refines libertarian positions, offering rigorous analyses and arguments on a range of moral, political, and economic questions.¹¹⁶

It is evident that, throughout its history, libertarianism has evolved by incorporating diverse intellectual currents, resulting in a multifaceted ideology with political, economic, and philosophical dimensions. In this section, I trace the trajectory of libertarian thought by analysing

¹¹⁵ Rand, A. (1988). *The Ayn Rand Lexicon: Objectivism from A to Z*. United States: Penguin Publishing Group.

¹¹⁶ Zwolinski, M., & Tomasi, J. (2023). *The individualists: Radicals, reactionaries, and the struggle for the soul of libertarianism* (First Edition). Princeton University Press. pp. 5-7.

the pivotal concepts that form its philosophical core, notably *individual freedom, property rights, and self-ownership*. This will be done through a close examination of the articulated views of Nozick, von Mises, and Hayek on these concepts. Through this inquiry, the section aims to clarify the contribution of libertarianism to the development of the idea of the self in political and moral philosophy and to show how it reinforces and extends Macpherson's theory of *possessive individualism*.

3.4.2 Nozick's Sovereign Individual: Deconstructing Anarchy, State and Utopia

In the third chapter of *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), Robert Nozick argues that the *ultramiminal state* has only one legitimate function: to protect individual rights against infringement by others. By contrast, the *minimal state* or *night-watchman state* compels individuals to contribute to the protection of all, and Nozick regards this compulsion as a violation of rights. This raises a crucial ethical question: is it morally justifiable to leave some individuals unprotected in order to avoid violating anyone's rights?¹¹⁷

To address this, Nozick introduces the notion of *moral side constraints* and outlines a non-consequentialist, deontological moral theory that rejects the idea that one must always do whatever produces the best overall outcome for society. Side constraints set limits on what may be done to individuals, regardless of the benefits that might result. Morality, on this account, functions as a barrier against infringing individual rights rather than as a goal-maximising calculus.

Richard Arneson (2011) notes that, for Nozick, respecting rights is not a goal to be promoted but a restriction on the means by which individuals may pursue their ends. Our ordinary moral framework, on this view, is non-consequentialist: individuals are not permitted to act solely on the basis of maximising the overall outcome, even if this is understood as maximising the fulfilment

¹¹⁷ Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Unites States: Basic Book, Inc.pp.26-27.

of moral rights. Such an interpretation would treat rights as claims which society must, in aggregate, seek to protect. Nozick argues that this misrepresents our ordinary understanding of individual moral rights. To understand a side constraint, we must treat it as follows: when deciding how to act, one must exclude any option that would violate another person's moral rights. From among the remaining permissible options, one is then free to choose, even if the chosen action does not lead to the best overall outcome according to any outcome-assessing standard.¹¹⁸

Side constraints thus reinforce the idea of the *sovereignty of the individual*, which is central to libertarian theory, and support the claim that individual rights stand above any appeal to the common good. Nozick makes this point by criticising the rhetoric of the "social good":

Why not, similarly, hold that some persons have to bear some costs that benefit other persons more, for the sake of the overall social good? But there is no social entity with a good that undergoes some sacrifice for its own good. There are only individual people, different individual people, with their own individual lives. Using one of these people for the benefit of others, uses him and benefits the others. Nothing more. What happens is that something is done to him for the sake of others. Talk of an overall social good covers this up. (Intentionally?) To use a person in this way does not sufficiently respect and take account of the fact that he is a separate person, that his is the only life he has.¹¹⁹

Nozick contrasts this position with classical utilitarianism, which he criticises for its willingness to sacrifice the individual for the greater good. In doing so, he emphasises the *separateness of persons*: individuals have distinct lives that cannot be morally aggregated. The individual is an end in themselves, not a means to the ends of others. This explicitly draws on the Kantian principle that persons must be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means:

¹¹⁸ Arneson, R. J. (2011). "Side constraints, Lockean individual rights, and the moral basis of libertarianism". In Bader, R. M., & Meadowcroft, J. (Eds.). (2011). *The Cambridge Companion to Nozick's Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1st ed.), New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.15–37.

¹¹⁹ Nozick, R. pp. 30-31

Side constraints upon action reflect the underlying Kantian principle that individuals are ends and not merely means; they may not be sacrificed or used for the achieving of other ends without their consent. Individuals are inviolable. More should be said to illuminate this talk of ends and means. Consider a prime example of a means, a tool. There is no side constraint on how we may use a tool, other than the moral constraints on how we may use it upon others.¹²⁰

On this view, individuals are sovereign in the sense that no one, including the state, may legitimately use them for the benefit of others without their consent. There is no moral rule that authorises the violation of the individual for the sake of social goals. Moral constraints bear on how individuals may treat other persons; they do not prescribe how individuals must organise their own lives so long as they refrain from wrongful harm. Nozick concludes that this perspective yields a specifically libertarian constraint of *no aggression*. As he formulates it:

The moral side constraints upon what we may do, I claim, reflect the fact of our separate existences. They reflect the fact that no moral balancing act can take place among us; there is no moral outweighing of one of our lives by others so as to lead to a greater overall social good. There is no justified sacrifice of some of us for others. This root idea, namely, that there are different individuals with separate lives and so no one may be sacrificed for others, underlies the existence of moral side constraints, but it also, I believe, leads to a libertarian side constraint that prohibits aggression against another.¹²¹

The idea of individual sovereignty here implies a conception of *self-ownership*. Although Nozick does not explicitly use the term *self-ownership*, the concept is implicit in his view that individuals have the right to dispose of themselves and their actions as they choose, provided they do not violate the rights of others. This extends to property in oneself and in one's labour.

¹²⁰ Nozick, R. pp.30-31

¹²¹ Nozick, R. p34.

The notion that individuals are proprietors of themselves recalls Locke's theory of property and, by extension, Macpherson's account of *possessive individualism* emerging within the liberal tradition. For Nozick, Lockean rights to self-ownership and private property appear as stringent side constraints against aggression. These constraints sharply limit what others—including the state—may do in the name of their own welfare or any purported social good. His implicit idea of self-ownership detaches the individual from any substantive conception of social obligation: there is, for Nozick, no social entity to which the individual *owes* anything.¹²²

Nozick's argument, grounded in the separateness of persons and the idea that individuals are ends in themselves and thus proprietors of themselves, culminates in the protection of their rights as the sole moral imperative. This picture of inviolable, sovereign individuals as ends in themselves implicitly supports the concept of self-ownership and thereby reinforces *possessive individualism*. The individual's right to control their own person and actions forms the basis for libertarian objections to state intervention and to socialist or egalitarian schemes that require the redistribution of resources or the use of individuals as means to collective ends.

3.4.3 Von Mises and the Ethical Foundations of Free Markets

Ludwig von Mises's ideas laid the foundations of the Austrian School of Economics. Perhaps the most vocal advocate of *laissez-faire* capitalism, von Mises championed economic individualism by asserting the importance of individual freedom as the precondition for a prosperous free-market society. The core claim in von Mises's economic theory is that individuals drive market forces and resource allocation through rational economic choices. In a free-market society, individuals should make economic decisions guided by their self-interest.

This idea is systematically developed in *Human Action* (1949). There, von Mises argues that the proper unit of analysis in economics is individual human action. Economic phenomena—

¹²² Nozick, R. pp.32-33

prices, market structures, and economic fluctuations—are not independent entities but the outcomes of purposeful actions taken by individuals. He emphasises the *subjective* nature of value: value is not an inherent property of objects but is determined by individuals in light of their preferences and judgements. This subjectivity underpins his *praxeological* approach. Praxeology, as von Mises conceives it, is the logical and deductive study of human action and forms the foundation of his economic theory. Through praxeology, economists can, in his view, derive universal truths about human action. This *methodological individualism* stands in contrast to collectivist approaches that treat society or groups as primary agents in economic analysis. Von Mises rejects the idea that collective entities have their own independent goals and actions, insisting that such entities are ultimately composed of individuals.

Individual freedom is therefore significant, but not as an end in itself and not because it has intrinsic moral value. Its importance lies in the belief that it enables individuals to make their own choices on the basis of self-interest. Although von Mises's economic individualism can be credited with taking seriously the complexity of real-world decision-making and individual preference, his defence of individualism is ultimately instrumental. This becomes clear in his discussion of slavery, where his opposition is framed in strongly utilitarian terms:

We liberals do not assert that God or Nature meant all men to be free, because we are not instructed in the designs of God and of Nature, and we avoid, on principle, drawing God and Nature into a dispute over mundane questions. What we maintain is only that a system based on freedom for all workers warrants the greatest productivity of human labor and is therefore in the interest of all the inhabitants of the earth.¹²³

What emerges from this passage is that establishing a free-market system is imperative because it enables individuals to exercise autonomy in decision-making, and this in turn enhances

¹²³ Von Mises, L., & Greaves, B. B. (2005). *Liberalism: The classical tradition*. Liberty Fund, p.4 (Original work published in 1927)

productivity and promotes the overall advancement of the system. The line of reasoning echoes utilitarian themes: the cumulative effect of individual actions within a free market should tend towards maximising overall welfare. Yet this also raises a tension within ostensibly individualistic ideologies such as libertarianism. Although libertarianism places individual freedom and rights at its doctrinal core, it appears, in this interpretation, to justify the subordination of individuals to the collective economic benefits of society.

This understanding of freedom also recalls the paradox identified by Macpherson in his analysis of Hobbes. Individuals appear free to make choices in line with their self-interest, yet they are bound to a market order that both depends on and constrains those choices. They are free only within the system whose requirements and imperatives they must accept.

The advancement of a free-market society depends on the liberties that individuals exercise. Free individuals may dispose of themselves and, by extension, their labour as they choose. Production is the outcome of human labour, and the division of labour is central to von Mises's economic theory. He argues that the distinction between humans and animals arises from the division of labour, which has elevated human beings—physically weaker than many animals—to the position of *masters* of the earth and creators of technological achievements. Without the division of labour, he contends, human progress would not have advanced beyond that of our distant ancestors. However, for such progress to occur, human labour must make use of nature's resources:

Human labor by itself is not capable of increasing our well-being. In order to be fruitful, it must be applied to the materials and resources of the earth that Nature has placed at our disposal. Land, with all the substances and powers resident within it, and human labor constitute the two factors of production from whose purposeful cooperation proceed all the commodities that serve for the satisfaction of our outer needs. In order to produce, one must deploy labor and the material factors of production, including not only the raw

materials and resources placed at our disposal by Nature and mostly found in the earth, but also the intermediate products already fabricated of these primary natural factors of production by previously performed human labor.¹²⁴

Von Mises thus maintains that labour contributes decisively to human well-being, and that nature should be utilised to satisfy humanity's "outer needs", essentially material requirements.¹²⁵ He further argues that the division of labour is most effective when the means of production are privately owned. This position aligns with Locke's claim that mixing one's labour with the land and appropriating it provides a powerful motivation for cultivation and productivity, thereby enhancing overall social welfare. As discussed in the preceding section, Locke justifies unlimited appropriation as a social and moral good grounded in natural law.¹²⁶

Similarly, von Mises defends the moral imperative of private ownership and seeks to establish an ethical basis for property rights. A society that respects these rights, he contends, will tend towards prosperity and social harmony.¹²⁷ In this sense, von Mises's theory embodies the logic of *possessive individualism*, mirroring Locke's argument for the ethical justification of appropriation and self-ownership across several dimensions. His economic individualism places subjective value and the decisions of freely choosing individuals at the centre of economic analysis. However, individual freedom is interpreted primarily as the absence of obstacles to market-oriented choice, rather than as a richer, more substantive notion of freedom. This risks distorting the deeper moral and political significance of individual freedom, reducing it to the capacity to participate unobstructed in market transactions.

¹²⁴ Von Mises, L. p.1

¹²⁵ Von Mises, L. p.2

¹²⁶ Locke, Second Treatise, ss 37,48

¹²⁷ For more on the idea of harmony and laissez-faire societies in Von Mises see Oliver, H. M. (1960). Von Mises on the Harmony of Interests. *Ethics*, 70(4), 282–290.

3.4.4 Hayek's Individualism: Rule of Law in Neoliberal Thought

The examination of Nozick and von Mises has revealed a form of unfettered individualism in which the inviolability of individual liberty, rights, and private property functions as a moral imperative. Between this perspective of radical libertarianism and socialism, Friedrich Hayek's theory occupies a more moderate position, often described as a form of "soft libertarianism".¹²⁸

In his essay *Individualism: True and False* (Hayek, 1945), Hayek distinguishes between two traditions of individualism. The *true* or sceptical tradition, associated with thinkers such as Locke, Smith, and Burke, stands in contrast to the *false* or rationalist tradition represented by the Encyclopaedists, Rousseau, and the physiocrats. Hayek maintains that only the sceptical tradition provides a coherent foundation for liberty and civic order.¹²⁹ At its core, individualism is not, for him, a doctrine of isolated or self-contained individuals. Rather, it is a theory of society that recognises the formative impact of social existence on the character and conduct of individuals:

But its basic contention is quite a different one; it is that there is no other way toward an understanding of social phenomena but through our understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behavior. This argument is directed primarily against the properly collectivist theories of society which pretend to be able directly to comprehend social wholes like society, etc., as entities *sui generis* which exist independently of the individuals which compose them.¹³⁰

In Hayek's exposition, individualism is thus a choice-focused theory of social behaviour. It holds that social phenomena can only be understood by examining individual actions and choices, and it emphasises the capacity of social systems to adapt to the variety and complexity of

¹²⁸ Zwolinski, M., & Tomasi, J. (2023). *The individualists: Radicals, reactionaries, and the struggle for the soul of libertarianism* (First Edition). NJ: Princeton University Press. p.17

¹²⁹ Hayek, F. A. (1948). *Individualism and Economic Order*. University of Chicago Press, p.4

¹³⁰ Hayek, F. A., p.6

individual behaviour. Central to this view is the concept of *spontaneous order*: society and its institutions arise from human action, but not from deliberate human design. Individuals, through their dispersed and fragmentary knowledge, contribute to the emergence and maintenance of this spontaneous order:

Far from being opposed to voluntary association, the case of the individualist rests, on the contrary, on the contention that much of what in the opinion of many can be brought about only by conscious direction, can be better achieved by the voluntary and spontaneous collaboration of individuals. The consistent individualist ought therefore to be an enthusiast for voluntary collaboration—wherever and whenever it does not degenerate into coercion of others or lead to the assumption of exclusive powers.¹³¹

According to John Gray (2013), one of the notable achievements of Hayek's social theory lies in its incorporation of central insights from conservative philosophy—particularly the emphasis on tradition and inherited practices—into a framework that also reflects classical liberal concerns, as found in Kant and Hume.¹³² Hayek acknowledges the significance of social institutions and practices as bearers and transmitters of knowledge. This aspect of his theory distinguishes him from libertarians, such as Nozick and von Mises, who tend to minimise the role of institutions beyond the minimal state. It also underpins another central tenet of Hayek's conception of true individualism: the importance of the *rule of law*. Morality, for Hayek, is embedded in legal principles that protect individual rights, and a just society is one governed by a framework of general laws designed to safeguard individual liberties.

In Hayek's account, individual liberty is a product of the legal order and does not exist outside civil society. He makes the further, and often criticised, claim that the rule of law—properly understood and consistently applied—is inherently protective of individual liberty. Individuals

¹³¹ Hayek, F. A., p.16

¹³² Gray, J. (2013). *Hayek on Liberty* (3rd ed). Taylor and Francis.p.12

can flourish in a free society only when it is structured by legal and moral conventions that provide a stable framework for action.¹³³

Hayek does not therefore defend freedom in the same *unfettered* sense as other libertarian theorists. His conception of true individualism and of social flourishing appears, at certain points, to resonate with Mill's defence of individuality. Yet Gray argues that the two ultimately diverge. Mill tends to regard convention as a form of social coercion that restricts individuality and advocates a wide sphere of untrammelled self-development. Hayek, by contrast, contends that robust social conventions, encompassing diverse moral perspectives in a pluralistic society, are necessary to sustain the conditions for liberty. Individuals must be willing to respond to adverse social feedback and to assess the reactions of others if they are to act effectively within a free society.

For Hayek, embracing spontaneous order is essential to the establishment of a free society. He explicitly rejects the claim that individualism posits atomistic, self-contained individuals. Instead, he insists on the interconnectedness of individuals within a complex social fabric. He criticises the rationalist tradition of *false* individualism for overestimating the powers of human reason and the capacity of individuals to plan and control social reality. Against this, Hayek argues that the functioning of societies is the outcome of spontaneous processes shaped by countless individual decisions over time, rather than the result of comprehensive, deliberate planning.

In line with Gray's interpretation, Hayek's ideas can be seen as offering a synthesis that complicates the apparent opposition between radicalism and conservatism. His social philosophy seeks to reconcile libertarian individualism with cultural traditionalism, emphasising the interdependence of individual liberty and the rule of law. Convention, in his view, plays a pivotal role in enabling liberty within a free society. By weaving together elements of conservative respect

¹³³ Gray, J. (2013). *Hayek on Liberty* (3rd ed). Taylor and Francis.p.59

for tradition and liberal concern for individual freedom, Hayek challenges the conventional dichotomy between liberalism and conservatism.

As Gray observes, Hayek's argument has the paradoxical implication that a contemporary conservative who values private property and individual liberty must, in certain respects, be an intellectual and moral radical:

Hayek's example suggests that radicalism and conservatism in intellectual and moral life may not be in conflict at all. If his argument about the sort of morality essential to the stability of the market order is sound, it has the paradoxical result that a contemporary conservative who values private property and individual liberty cannot avoid being an intellectual and moral radical.¹³⁴

The question that arises from this discussion is whether a shared foundation can be identified between these traditions—liberal individualism and traditional respect for social order—that might contribute positively to understanding and addressing contemporary environmental challenges. This question will be examined in the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

3.4.5 Libertarian and Neoliberal Perspectives on Freedom: Summary and Thoughts

Libertarian theories, as represented here by Nozick, von Mises, and Hayek, place the individual at the centre of their philosophical and ethical frameworks. A key unifying idea is that of *self-ownership*, derived from the doctrine of classical liberals such as Locke, who introduced the notion of the human being as proprietor of themselves.

This common thread of self-ownership and individual freedom is, however, articulated in different ways. Nozick maintains that individuals have inherent and absolute rights to themselves, their bodies, and the products of their labour. This principle of self-ownership grounds his wider

¹³⁴ Gray, J. (2013). *Hayek on Liberty* (3rd ed). Taylor and Francis.p.129

account of individual freedom: if persons are the rightful owners of themselves, then any infringement upon their autonomy constitutes a violation of their fundamental rights. Such infringements include not only direct physical coercion but also restrictions on how individuals choose to use their property or pursue their own ends, so long as they do not violate the rights of others.

While Nozick treats individual freedom in an almost absolute, Kantian sense, its significance in von Mises's theory is primarily instrumental. For von Mises, freedom does not possess intrinsic moral value. Instead, its importance lies in enabling individuals to make autonomous choices based on self-interest. His defence of individual liberty is rooted in the conviction that it is necessary for the proper functioning of a free-market society. Individual liberty allows unconstrained decision-making and the pursuit of one's interests through the division of labour, which generates increased productivity and overall social advancement. As noted earlier, von Mises's opposition to slavery is framed in terms of the higher productivity of free workers, who have greater incentives to work and innovate than enslaved persons. His advocacy of economic individualism is therefore utilitarian in character, justified by its contribution to aggregate welfare.

Hayek occupies a different position. Unlike Nozick and von Mises, he advances a more moderate libertarian stance.¹³⁵ His primary concern is to resist what he calls the *false* or rationalist tradition of individualism, which conceives society and its institutions as the product of comprehensive human planning. In contrast, Hayek aligns himself with the sceptical tradition of individualism, which holds that society and its institutions arise from human action but not from deliberate design. Individuals contribute to a *spontaneous order* through their dispersed knowledge, conveyed and preserved by social institutions and practices.

¹³⁵ Zwolinski, M., & Tomasi, J. (2023). *The individualists: Radicals, reactionaries, and the struggle for the soul of libertarianism* (First Edition). NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 17

For this reason, Hayek does not treat social conventions as straightforwardly restrictive of liberty. On the contrary, he argues that robust conventions, rooted in pluralism and embodied in the rule of law, are necessary to uphold individual liberty and rights. In this context, individual freedom is neither absolute in Nozick's sense nor merely functional in von Mises's sense. Rather, for Hayek, freedom is intimately tied to the rule of law, itself the product of evolving social practices and conventions.

In an earlier section, I discussed Macpherson's thesis that the emergence of political liberal thought is characterised by the idea of *possessive individualism*. A closer examination of libertarian theorists such as Nozick and von Mises reveals a clear continuation of this notion within libertarian doctrines, particularly in the domains of self-ownership, individual freedom, and private property.

Nozick's claim that individuals possess a natural right to themselves, treating their bodies and lives as inviolable property, aligns closely with Locke's doctrine of persons as proprietors of themselves. Individual freedom is expressed as autonomy and non-interference in one's own affairs, while self-ownership includes the right to dispose of oneself as one sees fit. This captures precisely what Macpherson describes as possessive individualism: the sovereign individual who has an absolute right to dispose of themselves without regard for any wider conception of the common good. Private property is justified as an extension of self-ownership, following the Lockean idea that the fruits of one's labour belong to the labourer.

Similarly, von Mises argues that private property has ethical foundations because it promotes social welfare and harmony. The division of labour, he claims, is most effective when the means of production are privately owned. This parallels Locke's argument that individuals are more motivated to cultivate land if they own it. Both thinkers therefore justify private ownership as a moral and social good that contributes to prosperity and order. In this sense, unlimited appropriation within market societies is regarded as morally defensible. As noted in the discussion of Locke, Macpherson goes further by emphasising that the significance of private property

extends beyond material possession: it also encompasses the social relationships that property structures. What were once social dimensions of property and labour have gradually been transformed into matters of individual proprietorship, shifting emphasis from shared concerns to private interests.

Another element that reveals the presence of possessive individualism in von Mises's work is the idea of *power*. His emphasis on self-interested action as the driving force behind market dynamics echoes the Hobbesian notion of power relations shaping human interaction. As Macpherson argues in his reading of Hobbes, individuals constantly compete to gain power over others, and this competitive struggle reflects the structure of a market society. An advocate of market economies, von Mises similarly views human actions, driven by self-interest, as the primary force determining market outcomes.

In sum, the exploration of libertarian theories and their connection to possessive individualism highlights the enduring influence of classical liberal ideas on contemporary political philosophy. The interplay between self-ownership, individual freedom, and private property underscores the multifaceted character of libertarian thought and its implications for how individual rights and liberties are conceived in modern societies.

The analysis of Nozick, von Mises, and Hayek developed in this section reveals a more nuanced dimension of possessive individualism: it does not simply produce an impoverished economic subject; it attacks the social foundation from which both genuine politics and genuine moral character derive. As John Milbank and Adrian Pabst (2016) argue, "both the economic and the political spring from the humus of the social" — the social realm of constitutive bonds, reciprocal recognition, and shared practice is the generative foundation from which both economics and politics emerge and upon which both depend.¹³⁶ The primary failure of possessive

¹³⁶ Milbank, J., & Pabst, A. (2016). *The politics of virtue: Post-liberalism and the human future*. Rowman & Littlefield International. p.78

individualism is therefore social and moral: it dismantles this foundation by constructing a self conceived as prior to its social bonds, and the economic dysfunction of the free market is the expression of that prior impoverishment rather than its cause. The trajectory traced in this chapter — from Hobbes's egoistic individual through Locke's proprietor of himself, through Nozick's sovereign rights-bearer to von Mises's economic agent and Hayek's market participant— is not merely a descriptive account of the economic features of liberalism but about the progressive dismantling of the social foundation upon which moral character and political community depend. As Milbank and Pabst observe, drawing on the history of political economy from Smith onwards, "post-Smithian economics no longer locates the market within the realm of civil society or the moral virtues of civic life."¹³⁷ The full implications of this displacement — for the possibility of genuine political community, moral character, and environmental responsibility — are developed in the concluding reflections that follow.

3.5 Conclusion and Philosophical Reflections: From Individual Liberty to Self-Ownership and Economic Freedom

Macpherson's theory of possessive individualism, originally developed to analyse early liberal political thought, has had a lasting impact on contemporary discussions of individual rights and liberties. Its resonance with libertarian theories centred on self-ownership and individual freedom indicates a clear continuity of possessive individualist ideas. This continuity suggests that debates about possessive individualism remain pertinent to contemporary reflections on the rights and freedoms of individuals. Applying Macpherson's framework to libertarian thought reveals a persistent thread of ideological connection, highlighting the endurance and adaptability of certain political and philosophical concepts over time.

¹³⁷ Milbank, J., & Pabst, A. (2016). *The politics of virtue: Post-liberalism and the human future*. Rowman & Littlefield International. p.122

Macpherson's insights draw attention to the complex dynamics of power transfer in market societies and to the limitations imposed by an overly possessive interpretation of freedom. Within the possessive individualist strand examined in this chapter, and in its libertarian and neoliberal inheritors, markets serve as the primary foundation for individual freedom, and the freedom they secure is predominantly economic in character. This diverges from the richer ideal of liberty present elsewhere in the liberal tradition itself — in thinkers such as Mill, whose emphasis on individuality and self-development points toward a fuller conception of freedom — and it is precisely this divergence that the present chapter has sought to trace.

Hobbes defines power as the means to secure survival, while Locke attributes a natural right to survival and grounds appropriation in self-ownership. Both, however, converge in understanding individuals as striving for security and the augmentation of power. In Hobbesian terms, value is construed as power over others; in Locke's account, the right to appropriate and dispose of one's labour is derived from self-ownership. The outcome is an endorsement of unlimited appropriation, facilitated by money, which introduces individuals to a competitive market society.

In both frameworks, individual freedom certainly exists, but it is realised within the constraints of a market society. This society thrives on exchanges of power and labour—where labour itself can be seen as an expression of one's power. Freedom thus becomes double-edged: it grants autonomy but simultaneously ties individuals to an economic system in which their participation in market exchanges is the principal expression of their agency. This sits uneasily with the broader liberal ideal of freedom, which encompasses political, civic, and cultural dimensions, such as freedom of speech, association, and expression.

It follows that within the possessive individualist tradition traced in this chapter — from its Hobbesian and Lockean foundations through to its libertarian and neoliberal expressions — freedom has become increasingly intertwined with economic freedom, producing a paradox in

which individuals are at once formally free and practically ensnared within a market society that prioritises the exchange of power, labour, and money over the wider expressions of liberty. This is not a claim about liberalism in its entirety: other strands of liberal thought — including Mill's defence of individuality or Rawls's account of primary goods and basic liberties — resist this narrowing. The argument is rather that the *possessive individualist* strand has proven particularly influential in shaping the dominant economic and political culture of contemporary liberal democracies, and it is this influence that requires critical examination. Macpherson's analysis of possessive individualism shows how individuals come to conceptualise themselves primarily as proprietors. This self-conception imposes significant constraints on their potential for holistic development by encouraging them to treat themselves predominantly as commodities. Such a narrow view of the self obscures the complexity of human nature and diminishes the capacity to appreciate the significance of social, emotional, and communal relationships.

The question, then, is whether market societies are inherently flawed. Considering the substantial advances achieved by market-based liberal democracies—in technology, science, and living standards—it is tempting to conclude that possessive individualism, embodied in the figure of the *economic man* and realised in market societies, is not in itself mistaken. Yet a deeper ethical question arises: has humanity advanced morally in step with its material progress?

The issue at stake is not simply the evaluation of the benefits of market societies or the political merits of liberal democracies as systems of governance. Rather, it concerns the ethical character of the type of human being these societies produce. The figure of the *economic man* appears ethically impoverished. The ethical problem manifests in several dimensions. First, there is the environmental cost: the exploitation and depletion of nature's resources driven by an unrestrained pursuit of economic gain. Second, there is a growing detachment from communities and from a sense of belonging, as market societies privilege individual pursuits over communal bonds. This erosion of community raises questions about the nature and value of human relationships and interdependence. Third, where freedom is reduced — as it is within the

possessive individualist and neoliberal frameworks examined here — to economic agency and consumer choice, this challenges rather than fulfils the core commitments of liberal democracy itself. When freedom is interpreted primarily as the capacity to consume and to act in markets, the wider possibilities of human flourishing are overshadowed. The broader spectrum of freedom — ethical, social, and political — risks being marginalised in favour of a narrow conception linked to economic participation. That this narrowing sits uneasily with richer strands of liberal thought is itself part of the argument: the economic man does not represent liberalism at its best, but he has come to represent its dominant cultural expression.

Thus, although market societies have undoubtedly generated material progress, the ethical implications of their impact on nature, communities, and our understanding of freedom demand critical examination. The tension between technological advancement and the moral impoverishment of the economic man underscores the complexity of this issue.

In conclusion, assessing whether market societies are inherently flawed requires acknowledging their dual character: they have brought about remarkable material improvements, yet they are implicated in serious ethical dilemmas. The juxtaposition of technological progress and the moral limitations of the economic man highlights the need for a more reflective and ethically informed understanding of freedom and human development.

What Macpherson's account ultimately reveals, however, is not merely an economic impoverishment but a civilisational one. If, as Milbank and Pabst argue, both the economic and the political spring from the social as their generative foundation, then the possessive individualist tradition traced in this chapter — in constructing a self prior to its social bonds — evacuates not one but three dimensions of human existence inseparable from genuine flourishing: the political, the moral, and the social. Each requires examination.

The political dimension is hollowed out in a structurally necessary way. When the self is conceived as the proprietor of its own person and capacities, political life can only appear as an

instrument for securing individual rights and enforcing contracts. Yet this transformation involves a paradox that Milbank and Pabst identify as central to liberalism's self-erosion. The rise of the free market, far from reducing the power of the state, involved "an unprecedented growth in the power of the central sovereign state. The economy and the political order were radically sundered, just because they were secretly so united."¹³⁸ Liberal minimalism about government conceals a new maximisation of technocratic power—one that operates not through the cultivation of civic virtue or ethical habits but through the management of material conditions, health, productivity, and social behaviour. As Pabst further argues, because contemporary liberals subordinate judgment to legal and utilitarian standards, they "depoliticize the polity to the point where liberalism becomes post- or even anti-political by replacing the conception of politics as the self-government of citizens with a conception of politics that amounts to the administration of things and the governance by numbers."¹³⁹

What disappears is not merely a particular institutional arrangement but the possibility of genuine deliberation about shared goods — the activity through which human beings constitute themselves as a political community in the Aristotelian sense. The possibility of a politics oriented toward eudaimonia, toward the question of whether "the main aim of government should be to seek to encourage human flourishing" rather than simply to manage the freedom of market choice, becomes structurally unavailable.¹⁴⁰

The moral dimension is evacuated through a parallel mechanism. The state that operates through technocratic management of material welfare rather than the cultivation of virtue intervenes, in Milbank and Pabst's formulation, "not to shape people's ethical habits educationally, but, rather, to determine their material conditions, strength and contentment in a scarcely

¹³⁸ Milbank, J., & Pabst, A. (2016). *The politics of virtue: Post-liberalism and the human future*. Rowman & Littlefield International. p.50

¹³⁹ Pabst, A. (2025). The New Era: What Comes After the Self-Erosion of Liberalism. *Telos*, 2025(212), 38–59. p.44-45

¹⁴⁰ Milbank, J., & Pabst, A. (2016). *The politics of virtue: Post-liberalism and the human future*. Rowman & Littlefield International. p.132

disguised contempt for higher human possibilities.”¹⁴¹ This is not an external critique of liberalism but a diagnosis of its internal logic: a framework built on the Hobbesian presupposition of a violent state of nature and the Lockean anthropology of self-possession necessarily incentivises the behaviour it originally assumed. Pabst identifies in this dynamic “the historically contingent but ontologically and ethically unnecessary victory of vice over virtue—the triumph of being selfish, greedy, distrustful, and violent over what is mutually beneficial, generous, trustworthy, and cooperative.”¹⁴² The moral implications for environmental life are direct: a framework that confines the cultivation of civic character to the private sphere while managing the public sphere technocratically leaves our relationship to common resources and shared environments governed only by market rationality.

The social dimension completes this triple impoverishment, and it is here that liberalism's self-erosion reaches its deepest level. As Milbank and Pabst argue “at the heart of liberal self-undoing lies the primacy of the economic and the political over the social and thus the subordination of both social bonds and civic ties to the abstract standards of law and contract.”¹⁴³

The realm of society is corroded from two opposite directions simultaneously. On the one hand, everything human is reduced to mere nature — the individual is naturalised as a self-interested animal driven by greed, fearfulness, and enmity, the presupposition that Hobbes installed at the foundation of liberal political thought. On the other hand, everything human is declared entirely artificial — a product of arbitrary will, a social contract that reflects nothing beyond human volition and can be simply undone by other acts of will. Between these two poles, liberal thought has no resources for sustaining the constitutive social bonds — of community, tradition, place, and shared practice — through which persons develop the capacities for genuine

¹⁴¹ Milbank, J., & Pabst, A. (2016). *The politics of virtue: Post-liberalism and the human future*. Rowman & Littlefield International. p.52

¹⁴² Pabst, A. (2025). The New Era: What Comes After the Self-Erosion of Liberalism. *Telos*, 2025(212), 38–59. p.46

¹⁴³ Milbank, J., & Pabst, A. (2016). *The politics of virtue: Post-liberalism and the human future*. Rowman & Littlefield International. p.58

moral and civic responsibility. Liberalism, as Milbank and Pabst observe, "tends to make the human vanish in two directions: first, archaically in the face of the tide of pre-human nature by appealing to the lowest instincts such as greed, fearfulness and enmity; second, futuristically, in favour of a 'posthuman' project" of technocratic management and cybernetic control.¹⁴⁴ The intermediary realm of genuine social life — neither raw nature nor artificial contract — is precisely what possessive individualism cannot sustain and what civic virtue environmentalism must recover.

The mechanism through which this dissolution occurs is what Milbank and Pabst, drawing on Polanyi, identify as desacralisation through commodification: capitalism "disembeds the economy from society" and renders exchange "without reference to tradition, association, duty or end, because things and people now lack intrinsic worth and their true value is their exchange value."¹⁴⁵ What is lost is not merely sentimental attachment to the past but the symbolic and relational dimension of goods — the dimension through which particular places, landscapes, and communities acquire the kind of value that motivates sustained stewardship. This is why the dissolution of social bonds has direct environmental consequences: it is not that people cease to value nature abstractly, but that the framework within which nature could be experienced as constitutively valuable — as part of the social and historical fabric of a shared home — is systematically dismantled.

This triple impoverishment — political, moral, and social — is the full scope of what this thesis diagnoses as the inadequacy of possessive individualism and its most developed expression in the economic man of neoliberal thought. The economic man is not only a poor steward of common resources, as Chapter Six will demonstrate through the tragedy of the commons; he is also a deficient political subject, not fully able to participate in genuine deliberation about the

¹⁴⁴ Milbank, J., & Pabst, A. (2016). *The politics of virtue: Post-liberalism and the human future*. Rowman & Littlefield International. p.58

¹⁴⁵ Milbank, J., & Pabst, A. (2016). *The politics of virtue: Post-liberalism and the human future*. Rowman & Littlefield International. pp.14, 96-97

common good, and a morally impoverished one, lacking the character through which environmental responsibility becomes intelligible as anything more than a constraint upon individual preference. The constructive turn to civic virtue environmentalism in Part II is philosophically necessary precisely because this critique operates at all three levels simultaneously. It is to the elaboration of these dimensions — and to the communitarian, virtue-based resources for addressing them — that the thesis progressively turns.

As I turn to the next chapter, I will examine more closely the notion of economic freedom, the figure of the ethically compromised economic man, and the moral implications of markets. In particular, I will consider how these dynamics shape attitudes towards the environment. By exploring these questions, the thesis aims to clarify the ethical complexities of market societies and to open up the possibility of a more morally conscious and sustainable conception of human flourishing, understood as the flourishing of situated selves within communities and their environments.

Chapter 4

The Ethics of the Economic Man: Tensions Between Economic Freedom and Morality

4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter concluded by highlighting the ethical shortcomings inherent in the model of the economic man as it has developed within the liberal tradition. While material and technological progress—much of it emerging in the context of free-market societies in Western liberal democracies—has undoubtedly contributed to higher living standards and expanded individual choice, this very success also exposes the moral limitations of an economicised conception of the individual. It would be an oversimplification to attribute material and technological advancement solely to the exercise of economic freedoms, and it would be misguided to claim that such progress is exclusively contingent on the operation of free markets. Broader liberties, particularly freedom of expression and political freedoms, have both enabled intellectual inquiry and created the conditions under which free markets have been able to develop. *Economic freedom* is thus not an isolated cause but part of a wider constellation of liberties.

This chapter examines in depth the ethical dimensions of the economic man, and the complex relationship between economic freedom and morality. To do so, it focuses on the thought of two prominent theorists who represent distinct strands within liberalism. First, I offer a detailed analysis of Ludwig von Mises's libertarian account of the relationship between morality and economic freedom, including his claim that personal freedom can only be realised through economic freedom. I then turn to Milton Friedman's neoliberal framework, exploring his understanding of the connection between morality and economic progress and his views on the responsibilities of business towards society and individuals.

Both von Mises and Friedman, as libertarian thinkers in a broad sense, tend to understand social relations through the lens of economic transactions and to prioritise economic progress for

both individuals and society. Mises argues that personal moral beliefs should not obstruct economic advancement and maintains a strict separation between individual moral views and the public, economic sphere. Friedman, for his part, insists that the primary—indeed, the only—social responsibility of business is profit maximisation, while both he and Mises affirm the primacy of economic freedom as a precondition for political and cultural freedom. On their accounts, economic freedom and economic progress are central to improving individual lives, raising living standards, and advancing society as a whole.

This position, however, discloses an important tension within their doctrines. On the one hand, libertarian theory explicitly distances itself from utilitarianism, rejecting policies aimed at maximising aggregate social welfare, which are often associated with socialist or interventionist governmental approaches. Such policies are criticised for risking encroachments on individual projects and liberties through expanded state regulation of economic activity. On the other hand, both von Mises and Friedman energetically defend economic freedom precisely on the grounds that it enhances social well-being and improves living standards, a line of argument that appears to rely on broadly utilitarian considerations. This apparent convergence with utilitarian reasoning sits uneasily alongside their formal rejection of utilitarianism and reveals a complex interplay of ethical and political commitments within their economic theories.

In essence, this chapter undertakes a critical exploration of the ethical intricacies surrounding the economic man and the ideal of economic freedom, by subjecting the perspectives of these libertarian thinkers to close scrutiny. The aim is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between economic freedom and morality and, on that basis, to contribute to the development of a more nuanced ethical framework for economic discourse—one that can accommodate concerns about personal virtue and civic responsibility. Through this analysis, I prepare the ground for a later synthesis that draws selectively on the most compelling elements of

these theories while also indicating their limitations, thereby opening space for an alternative account of individual agency oriented towards civic virtue and environmental responsibility.

4.2 Von Mises and the Imperative of Economic Freedom

The previous chapter concluded that von Mises is a staunch defender of economic freedom, insisting that individual liberty must extend into the economic sphere. As I argued there, although individual freedom is central to his economic philosophy, it appears to have primarily instrumental rather than intrinsic value. For von Mises, individual freedom is valuable because it enables people to act on their self-interest in ways that sustain a free-market order, increase productivity, and promote overall social advancement.

My critique is that this interpretation of individual freedom expresses a form of *possessive individualism* that distorts the richer meaning of freedom. Within his framework of rugged economic individualism, freedom is defined narrowly as the absence of interference in market-oriented choice rather than as a broader condition of self-governance and moral agency. In this section I focus on von Mises's most representative writings on economic freedom, particularly *Liberalism: The Classical Tradition* (1927) and *Economic Freedom and Interventionism: An Anthology of Articles and Essays* (2007), in order to clarify and assess his account of the relationship between freedom, morality, and economic agency.

4.2.1 Autonomy, Morality, and Economic Agency

At the core of von Mises's philosophy lies a strong conviction that free markets are the most efficient mechanism for allocating resources.¹⁴⁶ In a free-market system, individuals are permitted

¹⁴⁶ The term 'most efficient' is somewhat ambiguous. Does it refer to efficiency at the present moment or efficiency in an overall, long-term sense? These two interpretations are compatible only if resources are theoretically infinite. In such a scenario, the market would always allocate resources in the most efficient manner for each given moment, both now and in the future. Here, 'efficient' simply means the optimal distribution for the present moment. However, if resources are finite or require time to replenish (a crucial distinction), then 'efficient' encompasses a much broader scope. It must account for the sustainable allocation of resources over extended periods. Allocating all our resources

to pursue their self-interest through voluntary exchange, and a complex price system emerges that conveys information about preferences and scarcity. Prices function as signals, guiding entrepreneurs and consumers towards decisions that, on Mises's account, tend to produce the most efficient allocation of resources in society.

For von Mises, human society is an association of individuals engaged in cooperative action. The division of labour allows people to produce far more under conditions of social cooperation than they could in self-sufficient isolation; this cooperative surplus is, for him, the basis of civilisation and what distinguishes humans from animals. A society organised through free markets therefore appears as the most effective institutional framework for promoting individual well-being. Any interference with the *organic* mechanisms of the market disrupts this delicate equilibrium and produces unintended consequences that, he claims, often intensify rather than resolve economic problems.¹⁴⁷

Free-market societies, on this view, are characterised by voluntary exchanges among individuals whose capacity for intentional choice and deliberation both enhances economic efficiency and respects individual rights. Human deliberation is central to maintaining a functioning market order, and this in turn presupposes the autonomy of individuals. As discussed in earlier chapters, the idea of the independent, autonomous individual is a hallmark of the liberal tradition. Autonomy, closely linked to reason, forms the basis of moral agency; this is a connection von Mises explicitly recognises in his essay *The Economic Foundations of Freedom* (1960), where he writes:

Animals are driven by instinctive urges. They yield to the impulse which prevails at the moment and peremptorily asks for satisfaction. They are the puppets of their appetites.

Man's eminence is to be seen in the fact that he chooses between alternatives. He regulates

efficiently today, if it results in depletion tomorrow, is irrational. Yet, this appears to be an inherent consequence of von Mises's framework.

¹⁴⁷ Von Mises, L., pp.1-3

his behavior deliberately. He can master his impulses and desires; he has the power to suppress wishes the satisfaction of which would force him to renounce the attainment of more important goals. In short: man acts; he purposively aims at ends chosen. This is what we have in mind in stating that man is a moral person, responsible for his conduct.¹⁴⁸

The notion of purposive action is therefore central to von Mises's account of morality. Human action is characterised by the pursuit of chosen ends; individuals reflect on their options, regulate their behaviour, and aim at goals they have selected. Moral personhood, in this framework, is inseparable from responsibility. To say that the human being is a *moral person* is to affirm that individuals can be held accountable for their conduct because they act deliberately rather than merely following impulse. The moral nature of the person is thus grounded in the capacity for deliberate choice, behavioural regulation, and the purposeful pursuit of ends.

Von Mises also emphasises that religious traditions have long operated on the assumption that morality—involving the ability to distinguish right from wrong—presupposes freedom and autonomy. He contrasts this with historical periods, particularly medieval societies, in which rigid hierarchies and feudal bonds denied large sections of the population genuine freedom. Where individuals are subject to coercive control, they lack the basic condition for moral responsibility: the ability to choose. In von Mises's narrative, it is only with the dissolution of feudal structures and the rise of market society that individuals become truly free, in the sense of being able to make meaningful choices.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Von Mises, L., p.3-4

¹⁴⁹ At the time, one of the most marginalised groups was the underclass of serfs, whose freedoms were notably restricted in comparison to other social strata. Nonetheless, considerable scholarly debate exists concerning both the extent of serfs' freedoms and the factors contributing to the eventual demise of serfdom. For example see: Dyer, C. (2015). [Review of *Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England: From Bondage to Freedom*, by M. Bailey]. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 68(1), 311–313. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681367> and Hatcher, J. (1981). English Serfdom and Villeinage: Towards a Reassessment. *Past & Present*, 90, 3–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650715>

On this basis, von Mises argues that economic freedom is a precondition for political freedom and for the meaningful exercise of morality. Without economic autonomy, he suggests, exhortations to moral conduct are empty.¹⁵⁰ As he insists:

It is obvious that the exhortations and admonishments of morality make sense only when addressing individuals who are free agents. They are vain when directed to slaves. It is useless to tell a bondsman what is morally good and what is morally bad. He is not free to determine his comportment; he is forced to obey the orders of his master.¹⁵¹

This formulation captures the core of his position. For von Mises, only those who can act as free agents—defined in fundamentally economic terms—are proper subjects of morality. Free agents are individuals who can pursue their own interests and objectives, a condition that, on his view, is realised only in societies that adhere to free-market principles. Within the framework of possessive individualism, this freedom primarily concerns the ability to dispose of one's labour and property within a market order.

Classical liberals can agree that autonomy is integral to moral responsibility. My concern, however, is with the way von Mises narrows the notion of the *free individual* to the capacity to exercise economic liberties. His claim that morality is meaningful only in a free-market society implies that those without opportunities to participate in market transactions—for example, those unable to sell their labour or otherwise engage in economic exchange—are excluded from the sphere of meaningful moral agency. This conclusion flows from his broader conviction that economic freedom not only underpins, but effectively subsumes, other forms of freedom.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Von Mises, L., pp.3-4

¹⁵¹ Von Mises, L., p.3

¹⁵² Von Mises, L., p.3

He further maintains that the freedom granted by the market is not merely economic but encompasses moral, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions:

The freedom that the market economy grants to the individual is not merely 'economic' as distinguished from some other kind of freedom. It implies the freedom to determine also all those issues which are considered as moral, spiritual, and intellectual. In exclusively controlling all the factors of production the socialist regime controls also every individual's whole life. The government assigns to everybody a definite job. It determines what books and papers ought to be printed and read, who should enjoy the opportunity to embark on writing, who should be entitled to use public assembly halls, to broadcast and to use all other communication facilities. This means that those in charge of the supreme conduct of government affairs ultimately determine which ideas, teachings, and doctrines can be propagated and which not. Whatever a written and promulgated constitution may say about the freedom of conscience, thought, speech, and the press and about neutrality in religious matters must in a socialist country remain a dead letter if the government does not provide the material means for the exercise of these rights. He who monopolizes all media of communication has full power to keep a tight hand on the individuals' minds and souls.¹⁵³

There is considerable force in von Mises's warning that a state which monopolises the means of production and communication can easily suppress freedom of conscience, speech, and thought. His critique of the potential for socialist regimes to exercise pervasive control over citizens' lives captures an important danger. Yet his further claim—that personal freedom is inseparable from economic freedom—reveals how thoroughly he equates individual liberty, and indeed morality itself, with economic autonomy.

¹⁵³ Von Mises, L., p.9

Within his position, all aspects of liberty and morality derive their significance from their contribution to the functioning of the free-market system. The value of personal liberties is thus confined to their economic utility; they are not treated as goods that might have independent moral worth. Von Mises may appear to distinguish private moral life from public economic policy, but as I have argued, his framework ultimately subordinates both liberty and morality to the requirements of the market. Outside a free-market society, on his account, their meaning and value effectively disappear.

4.2.2 Redefining Individual Sovereignty: Consumerism and von Mises

Building on his defence of economic freedom, von Mises describes the historical movement away from rigid status hierarchies and caste systems towards a bourgeois order characterised by individual liberty, equality before the law, and the rule of law. This transformation, he argues, gradually extended the “faculty to choose between what is right and what is wrong” to wider segments of the population:

Yet for thousands of years a considerable part of mankind was either entirely or at least in many regards deprived of the faculty to choose between what is right and what is wrong. In the status society of days gone by the freedom to act according to their own choice was, for the lower strata of society, the great majority of the population, seriously restricted by a rigid system of controls. [...] Step by step they abolished all status and caste privileges and disabilities until they finally succeeded in establishing the system that the harbingers of totalitarianism try to smear by calling it the bourgeois system.¹⁵⁴

The economic foundation of this bourgeois system is, for von Mises, the market economy, in which sovereignty is attributed to the consumer:

¹⁵⁴ Von Mises, L., p.4

The economic foundation of this bourgeois system is the market economy in which the consumer is sovereign. The consumer, i.e., everybody, determines by his buying or abstention from buying what should be produced, in what quantity and of what quality. [...] In the market economy private property is in this sense a public service imposing upon the owners the responsibility of employing it in the best interests of the sovereign consumers. This is what economists mean when they call the market economy a democracy in which every penny gives a right to vote.¹⁵⁵

Here von Mises redefines individual sovereignty in explicitly economic terms. The sovereign individual of classical liberalism—conceived as a broadly autonomous moral and political agent—is reinterpreted as the sovereign consumer. Freedom becomes primarily a matter of market influence exercised through purchasing power. Although this retains a focus on choice, sovereignty is narrowed to economic decision-making.

On the one hand, von Mises is right to stress the crucial role consumers play in shaping economic activity. The idea that production decisions respond to consumer preferences emphasises the need to meet social wants in a market economy. His depiction of the market as a kind of democracy, where every unit of expenditure functions as a “vote”, fits with liberal-democratic themes of participation and agency, suggesting that economic freedom can empower individuals and potentially widen access to goods and opportunities.

On the other hand, his analysis neglects important ethical and structural questions about the nature of consumer sovereignty in practice. The emphasis on profit-driven responsiveness to consumer demand may incentivise short-term gains over long-term sustainability or social responsibility. Markets can promote products and services that are lucrative yet harmful to individuals, communities, or the environment. Moreover, von Mises’s idealised picture overlooks

¹⁵⁵ Von Mises, L., p.4

the extent to which the rise of large corporate actors can marginalise smaller enterprises and erode community structures, with significant environmental consequences.

He dismisses concerns about corporate power in strikingly simple terms:

It is silly to speak of the 'power' of big business. The very mark of capitalism is that supreme power in all economic matters is vested in the consumers. All big enterprises grew from modest beginnings into bigness because the patronage of the consumers made them grow.¹⁵⁶

In practice, however, corporations often wield significant economic and political influence that cannot be reduced to immediate consumer choices. Transnational corporations, driven by profit and oriented towards global markets, may operate largely independently of local consumer pressures. Their business models frequently rely on high levels of mass consumption, often concentrated in urban centres, and can destabilise local economies and traditional forms of commerce.

The expansion of online retail platforms such as Amazon illustrates this dynamic. The convenience of rapid delivery for urban consumers is secured by logistical systems and economies of scale that undermine smaller local retailers and reshape patterns of work and community life. Rural and small-town economies, lacking comparable infrastructure or bargaining power, can be left with diminished local businesses and weakened communal ties.¹⁵⁷

A further example is provided by developments in the US dairy industry over the last two decades. The drive to expand dairy exports has been accompanied by rapid consolidation, with family-owned farms pushed to the margins while large conglomerates and cooperatives dominate. Corporate-led initiatives, such as promotional programmes, often advance the interests of major producers rather than those of small farms. Intensified production methods have also contributed

¹⁵⁶ Von Mises, L., p.6

¹⁵⁷ https://ilsr.org/fighting-monopoly-power/small-business/#_ftn35

to environmental harms, including increased methane emissions from dairy manure and a shift towards feed-based rather than pasture-based systems, with significant ecological costs. Economic pressures have resulted in widespread hardship among smaller farmers, rising bankruptcy rates, depopulation in rural areas, and alarming levels of stress and suicide among farming communities.¹⁵⁸

These phenomena raise clear questions for von Mises's ideal of consumer sovereignty. Large corporations frequently relocate production to jurisdictions with weaker labour and environmental regulations, externalising social and ecological costs.¹⁵⁹ Aggressive marketing strategies can shape consumer desires in ways that undercut local businesses and disrupt traditional economies. As later chapters will examine in more detail, such practices generate serious externalities and challenge the idea that market processes can be treated as ethically neutral.¹⁶⁰

In light of these patterns, von Mises's portrayal of the market as a realm in which "every penny gives a right to vote" and big business simply responds to consumer preferences appears unduly idealised. It obscures the complex interaction of market forces, corporate power, and institutional frameworks, and it overlooks the socio-economic and environmental consequences of unrestrained market dynamics. A more adequate account of economic agency would need to recognise these asymmetries and incorporate considerations of community membership, civic responsibility, and environmental stewardship—dimensions that his model of consumer sovereignty largely leaves out.

¹⁵⁸ See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/31/us-dairy-policies-hurt-small-farms-monopolies-get-rich>

¹⁵⁹ Ben-David, Itzhak and Jang, Yeejin and Kleimeier, Stefanie and Viehs, Michael, Exporting Pollution: Where Do Multinational Firms Emit CO₂? (November 30, 2020). *Fisher College of Business Working Paper* No. 2018-03-20, Charles A. Dice Working Paper No. 2018-20, European Corporate Governance Institute – Finance Working Paper 717/2020. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3252563>

¹⁶⁰ Schnake-Mahl, A., Williams, J. A. R., Keppard, B., & Arcaya, M. (2018). A public health perspective on small business development: a review of the literature. *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, 11(4), 387–411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2018.1461678>

4.2.3 Assessing von Mises's Economic Theory: Final Reflections

In defending free markets, von Mises weaves together themes of morality, individual sovereignty, and political freedom in order to establish economic freedom as the paramount value from which other values derive. This strategy has several significant implications.

First, as discussed in the previous chapter, his account frequently assumes a broadly utilitarian justification for free markets, despite his explicit opposition to utilitarian policy-making. When he describes private property in a market economy as a form of public service, with owners compelled to use their resources in the “best interests of the sovereign consumers”, he effectively frames appropriation and capital ownership in terms of their contribution to the general welfare. This parallels Locke’s claim that unlimited appropriation of land is justified because it serves God’s will and benefits humanity by encouraging cultivation and preventing waste. Von Mises writes:

In the free-market economy the owners of capital are forced to invest it in those lines in which it best serves the public. Thus ownership of capital goods is continually shifted into the hands of those who have best succeeded in serving the consumers. In the market economy private property is in this sense a public service imposing upon the owners the responsibility of employing it in the best interests of the sovereign consumers. This is what economists mean when they call the market economy a democracy in which every penny gives a right to vote.¹⁶¹

This way of depicting the market as a locus of democracy reinforces his identification of individual freedom with economic freedom. The importance of freedom lies in its ability to enable individuals to pursue market choices aligned with self-interest, which in turn is said to advance

¹⁶¹ Von Mises, L., p.5

the public good. Economic freedom thus acquires an instrumental, welfare-promoting function; it is justified in significant part by its beneficial consequences.

Some commentators interpret this as a form of *indirect utilitarianism*.¹⁶² Leland Yeager (2001), for example, suggests that von Mises's claim that "social cooperation is in the interest of everyone" indicates a broadly utilitarian orientation and that his outlook can be described as a kind of *libertarian consequentialism*.¹⁶³ In a discussion of libertarian ethics, Yeager distinguishes between "libertarian moralism", grounded in the non-aggression principle, and "libertarian consequentialism", which defends free markets and limited government by appeal to their superior social outcomes. On his reading, von Mises stands in the latter tradition alongside Hayek and Hazlitt.¹⁶⁴

Patrick Gunning (2005) challenges this interpretation, arguing that von Mises should not be treated as a straightforward utilitarian. He maintains that Mises does not employ utilitarian welfare economics as a basis for defending laissez-faire, even if he sometimes presents utilitarian arguments in support of democracy and classical liberalism.¹⁶⁵ Gunning contends that Yeager misreads von Mises's discussion of the *old liberals* as endorsing their utilitarianism, whereas Mises's own position remains distinct:

More specifically, I wrote that Yeager refers to Mises's discussions of the old liberals as if Mises's acknowledgment of the old liberals' utilitarianism constitutes his agreement with it as a basis for making judgments about laissez faire. Yet Mises does not himself use the old liberal argument to support laissez faire [...]. Yeager introduces his discussion with the claim

¹⁶² The term *indirect utilitarianism* is used by John Gray, who asserts that Mill's utilitarianism differs from traditional forms of utilitarianism such as act and rule utilitarianism, on the grounds that neither the pursuit of overall happiness nor the pursuit of the agent's own happiness is directly advocated. See, Gray, J. (1996). *Mill on Liberty: A Defence, Second Edition*. New York: Routledge. (Original work published in 1983), p.38.

¹⁶³ Yeager, L. B. (2001). *Ethics as social science: The moral philosophy of social cooperation*. Edward Elgar, p.16

¹⁶⁴ Yeager, L. B. (2001). *Ethics as social science: The moral philosophy of social cooperation*. Edward Elgar, p.pp.283-284

¹⁶⁵ Gunning, J. P. (2005). Did Mises Err? Was He a Utilitarian?: Reply to Block. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 64(3), 939-960, pp. 946-951

that Mises ‘forthrightly and courageously avowed utilitarian ethics in a hostile intellectual atmosphere’ (Yeager 2000: 237). He goes on to write: ‘In some passages [in *Human Action*] Mises is quite explicit about his utilitarianism’ and ‘Mises presents a utilitarian case for democracy and classical liberalism’ (2000: 238–239). However, the fact that Mises presents a utilitarian case does not, by itself, demonstrate that he is a utilitarian or that he uses utilitarianism to support a policy or a system. None of the references or passages cited by Yeager unambiguously support the claim that the utilitarian position being presented was Mises’s own position.¹⁶⁶

Charles MacCan (2004) offers a related, though distinct, line of critique. He argues that von Mises is not a utilitarian in the traditional sense but rather an egoist or eudaemonist. According to this reading, Mises rejects notions of moral duty and transcendent moral values, treating ethical duties as coinciding with individuals’ own ambitions and desires. The pursuit of one’s own happiness is taken to align with the greater happiness of society because social cooperation is presumed to be in everyone’s self-interest. Egoistic ethics and eudaemonistic ethics are, in his view, functionally equivalent, since all human ends are understood in terms of the pursuit of pleasure or satisfaction rather than compliance with independent moral obligations. On this account, Mises’s framework considers consequences, but always from the standpoint of individual self-interest rather than a wider utilitarian calculus of aggregate welfare.¹⁶⁷

Similarly, João Rodrigues (2013) argues that von Mises saw free markets as the primary generators of human sociality, *economising on morality* by transforming individuals’ self-interested motivations into socially beneficial outcomes. Markets, on this view, produce internally the minimal moral norms necessary to reduce reliance on state coercion. Rodrigues suggests that Mises was optimistic about the *moral economy* of the unhampered market, both because of its positive

¹⁶⁶ Gunning, J. P. (2005). Did Mises Err? Was He a Utilitarian?: Reply to Block. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 64(3), 939–960, pp. 947

¹⁶⁷ McCann, C. R. (2004). *Individualism and the social order: The social element in liberal thought*. London: Routledge, pp. 171–172

effects on cooperation and because of the apparently simple moral code needed to sustain it—a code compatible with, and indeed nurtured by, market-driven self-interest.¹⁶⁸

Karen Vaughn (1976) raises a different concern about von Mises's approach. She argues that grounding the case for economic freedom primarily in empirical claims about its beneficial consequences is epistemically fragile. If the empirical evidence were to shift, the entire normative case for freedom would be endangered. Vaughn therefore recommends treating freedom as an intrinsic, foundational value that does not depend on empirical validation.¹⁶⁹ Otherwise, she warns, defences of freedom risk collapse when confronted with counter-examples:

Mises, unfortunately, attempted to refute the collectivists and authoritarians by accepting the terms of their argument and arguing for the superior ability of the free market to provide for the economic well-being of the populace. We see this in the economic-calculation argument, where he took his demonstration of the superior efficiency of the market as a complete refutation of socialism as a political system. Such an attempt to defend freedom is dangerous on two counts. First, it is open to empirical refutation. For instance, Mises' attack on slavery was based on the contention that slavery is inefficient: yet the recent work of Fogel and Engerman suggests that, on the contrary, it is a highly efficient system if one does not count the loss of utility to the slaves. How then does one argue for freedom in this case? Secondly, the defense of freedom on utilitarian grounds is dangerous for a more important reason. Even given that the market is much more efficient at providing for the well-being of individuals in a material sense, this is not the final refutation of a political system, because there may be nonmaterial items in individual utility functions.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Rodrigues, J. (2013). The Political and Moral Economies of Neoliberalism: Mises and Hayek. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 37(5), 1001–1017.

¹⁶⁹ Vaughn, Karen (1976), "Critical discussion of the four papers", in Laurence S. Moss (ed.), *The Economics of Ludwig von Mises*, Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, pp. 101-110.

¹⁷⁰ Vaughn, Karen (1976), "Critical discussion of the four papers", in Laurence S. Moss (ed.), *The Economics of Ludwig von Mises*, Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, pp. 101-110.

A further complexity in von Mises's theory concerns his assumption that economic freedom naturally extends to political and personal freedom. He maintains that the rise of modern capitalism, grounded in bourgeois liberalism, displaced absolute monarchies and hereditary aristocracies and thus paved the way for representative government and civil liberties:

Representative government is the political corollary of the market economy. The same spiritual movement that created modern capitalism substituted elected officeholders for the authoritarian rule of absolute kings and hereditary aristocracies. It was this much-decried bourgeois liberalism that brought freedom of conscience, of thought, of speech, and of the press and put an end to the intolerant persecution of dissenters.¹⁷¹

A free country, he writes, is one in which:

[..]every citizen is free to fashion his life according to his own plans. He is free to compete on the market for the most desirable jobs and on the political scene for the highest offices.¹⁷²

There is some historical plausibility in connecting market societies with the development of liberal-democratic institutions, and I do not dispute that free markets and liberal ideas have contributed significantly to prosperity and to the expansion of certain freedoms in Western democracies. My disagreement concerns the narrowness of von Mises's conception of freedom and his assertion that economic liberty inherently produces political freedom.

In his framework, personal autonomy is overwhelmingly associated with consumer choice and market participation, while the broader dimensions of freedom—political agency, civic participation, expressive freedom—are treated as derivative. The limitations of this view become apparent when we consider contemporary authoritarian or oligarchic regimes. In countries such

¹⁷¹ Von Mises, L., Greaves, B. B. (2007). *Economic freedom and interventionism: An anthology of articles and essays*. Liberty Fund. p.5

¹⁷² Von Mises, L., Greaves, B. B. (2007). *Economic freedom and interventionism: An anthology of articles and essays*. Liberty Fund. pp. 5-6

as China or Russia, many citizens can choose between different occupations and participate in consumer markets, yet political dissent is tightly constrained and basic civil liberties are limited. The presence of some measure of economic choice does not translate into meaningful political freedom.

By reducing freedom to market participation, von Mises neglects the complex interplay of institutions, norms, and power relations that shape both personal autonomy and collective self-rule. His claim that “there is no personal freedom without economic freedom” captures an important insight—that economic dependence can undermine other forms of freedom—yet it overstates the extent to which economic liberty is sufficient to secure the full range of freedoms central to liberal democratic ideals.¹⁷³

Finally, his belief that modern notions of autonomy and individual liberty are essentially products of the rise of free markets has been challenged by historians of ideas such as Larry Siedentop (2014). In *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, Siedentop argues that the concept of the individual as an autonomous moral agent, endowed with dignity and deserving of equal respect, emerged from Christian theological developments and was later taken up and transformed by classical liberal philosophers. He traces this conception through figures such as St Paul, St Augustine, and St Thomas Aquinas, and through institutional changes in canon law and early forms of secular governance. On this account, modern liberal values are rooted not only in economic and political transformations but also in a long moral and religious tradition that reshaped understandings of personhood.¹⁷⁴

This alternative genealogy challenges von Mises’s tendency to attribute contemporary freedoms primarily to the triumph of market institutions. It suggests that autonomy is first and

¹⁷³ Von Mises, L., p.9

¹⁷⁴ Regarding the origins of the idea of the individual as conceived within the liberal tradition see also: Tierney, B. (1997). *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on natural rights, natural law, and church law*. Scholars Press Emory University, and Berman, H. J. (1983). *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*. Harvard University Press.

foremost a moral idea, which was then incorporated into liberal political theory and only subsequently linked to economic arrangements. When juxtaposed with Siedentop's account, von Mises's focus on the economic dimensions of liberty appears one-sided: he sidelines the moral status of the individual as an end in herself and recasts freedom almost entirely in terms of market agency.¹⁷⁵

In sum, while von Mises offers a powerful defence of economic freedom and insightfully highlights the dangers of state control over economic and communicative resources, his theory ultimately subordinates morality and individual liberty to the imperatives of the market. This reinforces the broader critique developed in the previous chapter: the figure of the economic man, as theorised within this strand of liberalism, is ethically impoverished. In the next section, I turn to Milton Friedman's neoliberal account of the role of business in society, further examining the claim—central to both von Mises and Friedman—that morality has little relevance beyond the economic sphere and that the market can serve as the primary locus of social order.

4.3 Milton Friedman: Capitalism's Virtues and Ethical Boundaries

A prominent advocate of free-market principles and individual liberty, Milton Friedman has decisively shaped modern debates on economics, business ethics, and public policy. In this section, I examine Friedman's claim about the intrinsic connection between economic freedom and political liberty, assessing the extent to which he maintains that economic freedom promotes wider political freedoms. I then turn to his account of the social responsibility of business. My aim is to

¹⁷⁵ This perspective may initially appear to contradict the arguments delineated in prior chapters of the thesis concerning possessive individualism and its genesis within the liberal tradition as expounded by Macpherson. However, such a perception fails to acknowledge the complementary nature of these viewpoints. Macpherson's theoretical framework is indeed rooted in the liberal tradition, as he extensively draws upon its tenets to construct his analysis. Concurrently, Siedentop delves into the historical antecedents of individualism, positing its origins within the Christian tradition—a lineage that liberal philosophers subsequently embraced and extrapolated upon in formulating their conceptions of individual autonomy. Macpherson's focus lies not in the exhaustive exploration of individualism's historical genesis, but rather in delineating the evolution of possessive individualism within the framework of liberalism, particularly its symbiotic relationship with free-market ideologies. Thus, while Macpherson's narrative may commence where individualism converges with liberal theories, it does not preclude acknowledgment of its broader historical underpinnings.

clarify the ethical implications of his defence of profit-seeking behaviour and of his understanding of the role of business enterprises in society, and to draw out the broader consequences of his position for moral philosophy and public policy.

4.3.1 The Role of Economic Freedom

In *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman (1962) presents a forceful defence of capitalism as the most just and equitable way of organising society. He discusses a wide range of economic policy issues—taxation, government spending, regulation, monetary policy—while, like von Mises, arguing for a limited governmental role in the economy. The state's primary responsibility, on his view, is to maintain the legal framework that secures property rights and enforces contracts, thereby underpinning voluntary exchange.¹⁷⁶

A central theme of *Capitalism and Freedom* is the relationship between economic and political freedom. Friedman argues that:

Economic arrangements play a dual role in the promotion of a free society. On the one hand, freedom in economic arrangements is itself a component of freedom broadly understood, so economic freedom is an end in itself. In the second place, economic freedom is also an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom.¹⁷⁷

Friedman's first claim is that economic freedom forms an integral part of liberty. Economic freedom allows individuals to make choices—about work, consumption, investment, and enterprise—without undue coercion or interference, and this capacity for uncoerced choice is, for him, constitutive of freedom. In societies in which the state heavily regulates economic life, restricts entrepreneurial activity, and controls major sectors of production, individuals face limited options

¹⁷⁶ Friedman, M., & Friedman, R. D. (2002). *Capitalism and freedom* (40th anniversary ed). University of Chicago Press, p.4 (Original work published in 1962)

¹⁷⁷ Friedman, M., p.8

for employment, enterprise, and consumption. Such limitations can undermine their sense of autonomy and agency. By contrast, in societies with high levels of economic freedom, market entry is relatively open, competition and innovation are encouraged, and individuals are able to pursue diverse careers, business ventures, and consumption choices. In this way, Friedman maintains, economic freedom contributes directly to the broader experience of living as a free person.

While this argument is consistent with core liberal commitments, it is more problematic to claim, as Friedman does, that economic freedom is an *end in itself*. To identify liberty with economic freedom is to collapse a multifaceted concept into one of its dimensions. This risks reducing freedom to a set of market choices and material pursuits, thereby marginalising political, civic, and relational aspects of liberty. It also assumes that all individuals place the same value on economic freedom, which need not be the case. In circumstances where a person does indeed give high priority to economic autonomy, constraints on economic activity will diminish their overall freedom. But it does not follow that liberty can be equated with, or exhausted by, economic freedom.

Friedman's characterisation of economic freedom as both an end and a means also raises a conceptual issue. Proponents such as Friedman and other libertarians present economic freedom as an intrinsic component of liberty yet simultaneously treat it as an indispensable means to other goods, including personal autonomy and political freedom. Unlike virtues or happiness, which are typically pursued for their own sake, economic freedom is more plausibly understood as a condition that facilitates the pursuit of those ends. From a Kantian perspective, to describe something as an end in itself is to attribute to it a special kind of moral status, often associated with duties of respect; it is not obvious that economic freedom can be treated in this way. The idea of a duty to pursue economic freedom as such sits uneasily with the moral grammar of ends in themselves.

Friedman's second claim is that economic freedom is a necessary condition for political freedom. Political freedom concerns civil liberties and democratic self-government, whereas economic freedom concerns individuals' capacity to make independent economic choices. According to Friedman, when economic power is dispersed through a competitive market, it can act as a check on political power:

The preservation of freedom requires the elimination of such concentration of power to the fullest possible extent and the dispersal and distribution of whatever power cannot be eliminated—a system of checks and balances. By removing the organisation of economic activity from the control of political authority, the market eliminates this source of coercive power. It enables economic strength to be a check to political power rather than a reinforcement.¹⁷⁸

On this view, a free-market capitalist society fosters freedom by limiting the power of the state to control economic resources and by enabling individuals to make choices without political coercion. In contrast, socialist systems, characterised by state ownership or control of the means of production and communication, face severe difficulties in preserving dissent, since the same authority that directs economic life can also restrict information and suppress opposition.¹⁷⁹

The idea that economic freedom underpins political freedom is, as we have seen, also central to von Mises's doctrine. Yet the historical and contemporary record complicates this picture. There are many examples of authoritarian regimes with vigorous capitalist sectors and thriving markets. Such cases indicate that free markets can exist in the absence of robust political freedoms, which undermines the claim that economic freedom is sufficient to secure political liberty. Unlike von Mises, Friedman explicitly acknowledges this limitation:

¹⁷⁸ Friedman, M., p.15

¹⁷⁹ Friedman, M., pp.9-10.

History suggests only that capitalism is a necessary condition for political freedom. Clearly it is not a sufficient condition. Fascist Italy and Fascist Spain, Germany at various times in the last seventy years, Japan before World Wars I and II, czarist Russia in the decades before World War I—are all societies that cannot conceivably be described as politically free. Yet, in each, private enterprise was the dominant form of economic organisation. It is therefore clearly possible to have economic arrangements that are fundamentally capitalist and political arrangements that are not free.¹⁸⁰

Friedman thus concedes that capitalism is compatible with political unfreedom. Nevertheless, he insists that capitalism is a *necessary* condition for political liberty, and that only societies with substantial economic freedom can sustain democratic institutions and civil rights over time.

This leads to the question of how Friedman ultimately values freedom. Does he treat individual freedom as intrinsically valuable, or primarily as a means to sustain a free-market order? Friedman characterises the liberal position as follows:

As liberals, we take freedom of the individual, or perhaps the family, as our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements. Freedom as a value in this sense has to do with the interrelations among people; it has no meaning whatsoever to a Robinson Crusoe on an isolated island (without his Man Friday). [...] Similarly, in a society freedom has nothing to say about what an individual does with his freedom; it is not an all-embracing ethic. Indeed, a major aim of the liberal is to leave the ethical problem for the individual to wrestle with. The ‘really’ important ethical problems are those that face an individual in a free society—what he should do with his freedom. There are thus two sets of values that a liberal will emphasise—the values that are relevant to relations among people, which is the context in

¹⁸⁰ Friedman, M., pp.9-10.

which he assigns first priority to freedom; and the values that are relevant to the individual in the exercise of his freedom, which is the realm of individual ethics and philosophy.¹⁸¹

Here Friedman affirms that freedom of the individual is the ultimate standard for assessing social arrangements, and he distinguishes between two domains: interpersonal relations, where the liberal assigns priority to freedom, and the ethical sphere in which individuals decide how to use that freedom. Freedom, in this sense, is not an “all-embracing ethic”; the liberal, he suggests, seeks to secure a framework of freedom within which individuals can then confront their own moral questions.

This division has important implications. In the first domain, freedom governs relations among individuals: freedom of association, contract, expression, and so forth. In the second, ethical reflection is treated as a private matter, concerned with how individuals choose to live within a framework of rights and liberties. While this separation aims to preserve individual autonomy and to avoid imposing a comprehensive moral doctrine, it also sidelines the role of shared ethical norms and community membership in sustaining a cohesive social order.

By relegating ethical questions largely to the private sphere, Friedman risks underestimating the ways in which common values—such as honesty, trustworthiness, and mutual respect—are necessary for social cooperation and civic life. Communities in which such values are cultivated tend to display higher levels of trust and social stability; conversely, where ethical considerations are treated as purely individual, social relationships can fragment, with individuals prioritising narrow self-interest over the common good. If shared ethical commitments erode, social bonds weaken and collective projects become harder to sustain.

Friedman is correct to insist that individuals must ultimately take responsibility for their own ethical deliberation, and that liberal institutions should not prescribe a single conception of

¹⁸¹ Friedman, M., p.12

the good life. Yet his sharp distinction between freedom as a value governing interpersonal relations and ethics as an individual concern obscures the ways in which virtues and civic responsibilities are formed and maintained within communities. It also leaves ambiguous the scope of the *personal responsibility* that he and other libertarians invoke. Is responsibility here confined to prudent market conduct by self-interested agents, or does it encompass a broader set of responsibilities to others, including environmental and civic duties? As I argue in subsequent chapters, these questions point to a tension at the heart of Friedman's liberalism between the celebration of choice and the under-theorisation of the moral content of responsible agency.

4.3.2 The Social Responsibility of Business: Individual and Collective Responsibility in the Pursuit of Self-Interest

In 1970, *The New York Times Magazine* published Friedman's influential essay "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits". There he critically examines the idea that businesses should pursue social goals beyond profit-making, and considers its implications for individual agency, corporate responsibility, and the role of the state. He had already touched on related issues in earlier work on monopolies, where he observed that monopoly power constrains voluntary exchange by restricting alternatives and raises distinctive questions about the *social responsibility* of monopolists, who exercise visible influence over market conditions.¹⁸²

In the 1970 essay, Friedman decisively rejects the claim that business organisations possess social responsibilities in any robust sense. Responsibilities, he argues, belong to persons, not to abstract entities like "business". Corporate executives, as individuals, can of course have responsibilities, but their primary obligation in their role as managers is fiduciary: to conduct the

¹⁸² Friedman, M., p.120

business in accordance with the interests of its owners, which means maximising profits within the law and accepted ethical norms.¹⁸³

The distinction between individual and corporate responsibility is central to his argument. Individuals may voluntarily undertake social responsibilities—towards family, community, charitable causes, and so on—according to their own values and conscience. But executives, in their corporate capacity, are agents of shareholders. If they divert corporate resources to address social problems—by, for example, spending profits on environmental projects, providing employment beyond what is economically justified, or supporting political causes—they effectively impose personal preferences on shareholders, employees, and customers without their explicit consent. For Friedman, such actions resemble an unmandated tax and appropriation of others' resources for public purposes, and they blur the line between economic and political decision-making.¹⁸⁴

This line of reasoning reflects his broader commitment to individual freedom and voluntariness. Assigning *social responsibilities* to business, he contends, obscures the locus of genuine agency and risks legitimising forms of coercion. In his view, initiatives aimed at promoting social goals, including environmental protection, should largely remain within the sphere of individual choice and voluntary association. Collective measures that compel individuals to support causes they do not endorse—such as mandatory levies for environmental schemes—are viewed with suspicion because they override the pluralism of individual values.

To sharpen this contrast between voluntariness and coercion, Friedman juxtaposes what he calls the political principles underlying market and political mechanisms:

¹⁸³ Friedman, M. (2007). "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits". In W. C. Zimmerli, M. Holzinger, & K. Richter (Eds.), *Corporate Ethics and Corporate Governance* (pp. 173–178). Springer Berlin Heidelberg. (Original work published in The New York Times Magazine, September 1970) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-70818-6_14

¹⁸⁴ This is quite problematic considering that there are corporations which have no owners. These might include companies such as John Lewis, Universities or even the United Nations. Also, raises the question about the responsibilities of companies with limited liability. See also here: <https://www.companydebt.com/insolvency/shareholders-liaable-company-debts/>

The political principle that underlies the market mechanism is unanimity. In an ideal free market resting on private property, no individual can coerce any other, all cooperation is voluntary, all parties to such cooperation benefit or they need not participate. There are no 'social' values, no 'social' responsibilities in any sense other than the shared values and responsibilities of individuals. Society is a collection of individuals and of the various groups they voluntarily form.

The political principle that underlies the political mechanism is conformity. The individual must serve a more general social interest—whether that be determined by a church or a dictator or a majority. The individual may have a vote and say in what is to be done, but if he is overruled, he must conform. It is appropriate for some to require others to contribute to a general social purpose whether they wish to or not.¹⁸⁵

Friedman praises the market mechanism as embodying unanimity: participation is voluntary, transactions are mutually beneficial, and no one need act against their will. There are no independent *social* values beyond those held by individuals themselves; society is simply a collection of persons and voluntary associations. Political mechanisms, by contrast, are said to rest on conformity: individuals may participate in decision-making, but if outvoted they are compelled to comply with policies they reject. In this context, requiring firms to pursue social objectives amounts to extending the imperatives of political conformity into the domain of voluntary market arrangements.

This contrast, however, is more problematic than Friedman acknowledges. When he speaks of *individuals* in the context of the market, he largely has in mind owners of enterprises and those with significant economic power. Yet even in a formal market order, there can be considerable

¹⁸⁵ Friedman, M. (2007). The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits in W. C. Zimmerli, M. Holzinger, & K. Richter (Eds.), *Corporate Ethics and Corporate Governance* (pp. 173–178). Springer Berlin Heidelberg. p.178

internal coercion within firms, where owners and managers set terms that employees must accept on a “take it or leave it” basis. Moreover, when Friedman denies that corporations have social responsibilities, he implicitly shifts the focus from individual owners to the corporate entity as a whole, since it is corporations that are typically the subject of debates about “corporate social responsibility”. This involves a kind of equivocation: he slides between treating the individual owner and the corporate enterprise as if they were the same kind of “individual”.

If, however, we treat the corporate entity as a distinct agent—capable of entering contracts, owning property, and affecting third parties—then it is not clear why it should be exempt from responsibilities that attach to other powerful agents in society. An individual owner, as a citizen, is subject to legal and moral responsibilities that constrain the exercise of her freedom. Ownership of an asset such as a car does not confer the right to use it in ways that disregard safety, environmental laws, or the rights of others. By analogy, ownership of a business does not, on its own, justify the view that corporate activity should be answerable only to the pursuit of profit, without regard to wider social and environmental consequences.

In this sense, Friedman’s attempt to restrict responsibility to natural persons, while treating the corporation as merely their “instrument”, understates the extent to which business enterprises function as powerful collective actors whose decisions shape the conditions of life for workers, communities, and ecosystems. If the freedom of business is, in practice, the freedom of owners and executives acting through corporate structures, then the social responsibilities borne by those individuals as citizens plausibly extend, at least in part, to the enterprises through which they exercise their power.

4.4 The Libertarian Paradigm: Ethical and Philosophical Implications

The claim that the free market—often identified with capitalism—constitutes the most equitable system for organising society rests on a number of core premises. Foremost among these

is the idea that markets align with fundamental human values such as individual autonomy, voluntary exchange, and personal responsibility. Libertarian theorists like von Mises and Friedman, whose work has been examined in this chapter, maintain that freedom of choice in the economic sphere not only facilitates efficient transactions but also cultivates responsible agents capable of shaping their own lives. In a free-market system, individuals are understood as autonomous choosers, able to pursue their interests and enter voluntary exchanges with others; this is presented as integral to human dignity and self-realisation.

From this perspective, the free market is also taken to embody an ethos of mutual benefit and cooperation. Market exchanges are seen as consensual and non-coercive, reflecting the reciprocal advantages that arise when individuals interact on the basis of contract rather than compulsion. For von Mises and Friedman, this voluntariness underpins the moral dimension of economic freedom: by facilitating voluntary transactions, capitalism is said to foster autonomy, reciprocity, and social harmony, and thereby to promote human flourishing.

Moreover, libertarian theorists place considerable emphasis on personal responsibility. In a free-market society, individuals bear the consequences of their choices; this is supposed to encourage prudence, effort, and self-improvement, reinforcing a sense of agency and empowerment. Markets are likewise associated with meritocratic ideals: those who provide valuable goods or services are, at least in principle, rewarded in proportion to their contribution, independent of social origin. In this meritocratic narrative, capitalism appears not only as a generator of prosperity and efficiency but also as a system that honours justice, equality of opportunity, and human dignity.

Yet, as the preceding analysis of von Mises and Friedman has shown, this libertarian picture raises substantial ethical and philosophical questions. Friedman's account of the social responsibility of business is instructive here. In his view, the primary responsibility of corporate executives is to maximise profits for shareholders within the rules of the game, that is, within the

law and “without deception or fraud”.¹⁸⁶ Individuals, considered in their private capacity, may adopt social or moral commitments, but businesses as such are not thought to bear responsibilities beyond profit generation. To require firms to support social or environmental goals is, on this account, to impose illegitimate collective obligations on private agents and to extend the coercive reach of the political mechanism into the sphere of voluntary market relations.

This position, however, proves more fragile once we scrutinise its underlying assumptions. Friedman’s insistence that business should pursue profits “within the bounds” of fair competition implicitly acknowledges that market activity operates within, and depends upon, an ethical and legal framework. The very idea that deception and fraud are impermissible presupposes a set of moral norms concerning honesty, trust, and the protection of vulnerable parties. The attempt to restrict morality to the private realm, while treating the public economic sphere as normatively neutral, is therefore unstable.

The sharp division Friedman draws between individual and corporate responsibility also neglects the continuity between personal character and professional conduct. His framework suggests that morality can be confined to private life, while economic roles are to be governed by market imperatives alone. Yet this separation is difficult to maintain. Psychological and ethical reflection both indicate that traits such as honesty, integrity, and concern for others are not easily compartmentalised; they inform how individuals act across different domains of life. The figure of the *successful* but morally unscrupulous agent illustrates the problem: even if such a person operates within the literal limits of the law, there is no reason to assume that their decisions will reliably avoid serious ethical or legal complications, especially in domains where law and morality are closely intertwined, such as environmental regulation or workplace safety.

¹⁸⁶ Friedman, M. (2007). The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits in W. C. Zimmerli, M. Holzinger, & K. Richter (Eds.), *Corporate Ethics and Corporate Governance* (pp. 173–178). Springer Berlin Heidelberg. p.178

If morality is treated as a purely private matter, it risks degenerating into a subjective preference detached from shared norms, customs, and standards. This way of thinking presupposes an atomistic individual insulated from the formative influence of family, community, and society. By contrast, an alternative perspective, which I develop in later chapters, emphasises that moral character and convictions are shaped through memberships and loyalties—within families, neighbourhoods, civic associations, and political communities. From this standpoint, to suggest that personal responsibility is primarily the outcome of market choice and economic self-sufficiency is a narrow, individualistic account that sidelines the moral significance of these social attachments.

Friedman's claim that only individuals—not corporations or other collective entities—can bear responsibilities is likewise problematic. If taken seriously, this would imply that states, governments, universities, and schools also lack responsibilities as such. Yet these institutions clearly enter into obligations, are held liable under law, and are subject to regulatory standards concerning, for example, emissions, pollution, or labour conditions. In practice, then, businesses do bear responsibilities that are not reducible to the private choices of individual owners. Legal frameworks governing environmental externalities, such as prohibitions on dumping toxic waste into rivers, already embody the recognition that corporate decisions impose costs on others and must therefore be constrained in the name of wider social goods.

This points to a further limitation of the libertarian paradigm: its treatment of markets as responding primarily to consumer demand often obscures the impact of market processes on other stakeholders, especially producers and local communities. Contemporary market dynamics frequently generate unintended harms for those with weaker bargaining power. For example, the increasing dominance of large supermarket chains in food supply has, in many contexts, placed severe pressure on small farmers, whose prices and conditions of sale are dictated by powerful buyers. The UK Parliamentary Committee on Welsh Affairs (2009) documented how such

dynamics undermine the financial viability of local farmers and erode their capacity to innovate, even in the presence of regulatory oversight. Despite formal adherence to the ideal of voluntary exchange, the structural imbalance between large retailers and small producers raises serious questions about fairness and about the real scope of individual freedom for those on the weaker side of such relationships.¹⁸⁷

Friedman's endorsement of unanimity as the *political principle* underlying markets also merits critical scrutiny. He presents the ideal free market as a domain in which no one is coerced, all cooperation is voluntary, and every party can decline participation. He contrasts this with the conformity imposed by political mechanisms, where individuals may be compelled to contribute to general social purposes even when they disagree. Yet he concedes that unanimity is not always feasible and that some resort to political mechanisms is unavoidable, for example in emergencies or collective-security situations. This tacit recognition of the common good in certain contexts raises a natural question: if it is legitimate to require collective sacrifice for, say, national defence or public health, why should environmental protection—particularly in the face of serious ecological degradation—not warrant similar collective measures? Friedman's suggestion that acknowledging social responsibility would necessarily extend political control to every human activity represents a significant overstatement rather than a logically necessary conclusion.

Taken together, the analyses of von Mises and Friedman in this chapter reveal the strengths and limitations of the libertarian paradigm. Free markets can, under certain conditions, support important values: individual autonomy, opportunities for initiative, and forms of meritocratic reward. They also generate material prosperity and can facilitate pluralism by dispersing certain kinds of power. However, in the libertarian accounts examined here, these values derive their significance almost entirely from their location within the market order. Individual freedom is predominantly cast as economic freedom; personal responsibility is framed largely in terms of

¹⁸⁷ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmwelaf/184/18406.htm>

consumer or entrepreneurial choice; and morality is compartmentalised as a private concern, disconnected from the public practices and institutions that shape common life. In this way, the libertarian paradigm converges with Macpherson's analysis of possessive individualism, in which the individual is treated as the proprietor of her own capacities, and freedom is effectively reduced to the unimpeded use of those capacities in the market.

A further and deeper dimension of the libertarian paradigm's inadequacy concerns its depoliticising effect. When freedom is reduced to economic freedom in the manner of von Mises and Friedman, what is lost is not only a richer conception of morality but the very possibility of genuine political deliberation about shared goods—displaced by what Pabst identifies as the replacement of genuine political self-government with the administration of things and the governance by numbers.¹⁸⁸ What the libertarian framework forecloses is precisely this shared purposiveness—the capacity of citizens to deliberate together about what constitutes the common good and to organise collective life accordingly. Environmental responsibility offers a paradigmatic illustration: once ecological obligations are framed as individual consumer choices or market externalities, the question of what a community owes to its shared environment—a fundamentally political question requiring genuine deliberation about the common good—becomes either invisible or unanswerable within the available vocabulary. That this question cannot be posed is not accidental but structural: it is the outcome of a framework that has systematically evacuated the political dimension of collective life while presenting that evacuation as natural, neutral, and freedom-enhancing.

This point extends to the relationship between morality and politics that Friedman's framework severs. As argued earlier in this chapter, Friedman compartmentalises moral responsibility, confining it to the private sphere while the public economic sphere operates according to the imperatives of profit maximisation. Yet Pabst argues that the wall erected between

¹⁸⁸ Pabst, A. (2025). The New Era: What Comes After the Self-Erosion of Liberalism. *Telos*, 2025(212), 38–59.p.45

economic and political life, as with Friedman here, is ultimately "artificial and illusory" — what appears as a separation of spheres "simply conceals the covert alliances" through which market rationality comes to dominate all dimensions of social life.¹⁸⁹ Moral character — the consistent dispositions of honesty, trustworthiness, and civic responsibility — cannot be confined to one domain without distorting all others. The attempt to do so does not neutralise the moral dimension of economic life; it leaves that dimension ungoverned and colonises it by default with the logic of self-interest — precisely the inversion that any adequate account of civic responsibility must resist.

The broader implication is that the libertarian model tends to erode the acknowledged importance of communal ties, familial bonds, and civic memberships in shaping moral character and sustaining a shared concern for the common good. While the benefits of market coordination and economic freedom should not be denied, an adequate ethical and political framework must also recognise the intrinsic value of community membership, traditional social norms, and the obligations that arise from living with others in interdependent relationships. The challenge, then, is not to reject markets wholesale, but to ask whether we can preserve the advantages of economic freedom while tempering the excesses of unfettered individualism and the ethical impoverishment of the economic man.

This chapter has shown that, within the libertarian paradigm, there are deep tensions between the celebration of economic freedom and the under-theorisation of moral and civic responsibility. It has raised questions about whether freedom can be reduced to market choice, whether responsibility can be confined to the private sphere, and whether corporations can be treated as purely economic instruments without acknowledging their wider social and environmental impact. These questions point directly towards the concerns of the following chapter. There, I turn to Friedrich Hayek's account of markets, knowledge, and spontaneous order, and examine his claims about the role of free markets in the use and management of natural

¹⁸⁹ Pabst, A. (2025). The New Era: What Comes After the Self-Erosion of Liberalism. *Telos*, 2025(212), 38–59.pp.44-45

resources. This provides the basis for assessing whether libertarian and neoliberal appeals to the price mechanism can adequately address environmental challenges, or whether a richer account of civic virtue and community-based responsibility is required.

Chapter 5

Hayek's Economic Philosophy and Its Application to Environmental Resource Management

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter concluded by highlighting the ethical dilemmas and moral consequences arising from libertarianism's extreme emphasis on individualism. The analysis showed how unrestrained libertarian ideas tend to reduce individual liberty to market participation, where consumer sovereignty is primarily understood as the capacity to make economic choices and engage in voluntary transactions. This way of thinking extends beyond economic life and shapes attitudes across social and political domains, including responses to environmental challenges. For example, the construction of a factory in an ecologically sensitive area that is likely to generate pollution may be justified, on libertarian grounds, by appealing to economic growth and job creation. Within the approaches of von Mises and Friedman, business profit and aggregate prosperity easily take precedence over environmental protection. While economic prosperity and financial security are undeniably important, this raises a pressing question: does economic growth justify the reckless exploitation of natural resources and the degradation of the environment?

In this chapter, I move away from the more extreme libertarian positions of von Mises and Friedman and examine Friedrich Hayek's liberal views on environmental and natural resource management. I focus in particular on his essay *Agriculture and Natural Resources* (1960), in which he sets out key aspects of his thinking on environmental and resource use.¹⁹⁰

I then consider how his broader economic philosophy bears on environmental questions, exposing the limitations of his approach and its implications for environmental conservation. As

¹⁹⁰ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. University of Chicago press, p.48. (Original work published in 1960)

will become clear, Hayek's analysis often converges with his libertarian counterparts in justifying the use of natural resources for economic growth. At the same time, I question the extent and purity of his liberalism, since elsewhere he exhibits a marked sympathy for conservative thinkers and for ideas concerning the role of traditions, norms, customs, and the rule of law.

The second part of the chapter addresses these tensions in Hayek's philosophy. I argue that although he advocates free markets and liberalism in practical economic matters, at the intellectual level he frequently aligns with conservative perspectives. Despite his explicit rejection of conservatism in *Why I Am Not a Conservative* (1960), he repeatedly appeals to Edmund Burke and other conservative authors.¹⁹¹ In many respects, his philosophy therefore overlaps with conservative thought. As a result, despite his free-market approach to agriculture and natural resources, the internal contradictions of his position and his implicit conservative leanings reveal him as a more moderate liberal thinker who functions as a bridge between libertarianism and conservatism.

In the next subsection, I provide an overview of Hayek's broader economic philosophy, with particular emphasis on his advocacy of minimal government intervention and his account of market mechanisms grounded in the idea of spontaneous order. This contextualises his views within classical liberalism and free-market economics and prepares the ground for the subsequent discussion of his approach to environmental issues.

5.2 Hayek's Economic Philosophy: Free Markets and Spontaneous Order

Hayek's concept of spontaneous order is a central pillar of his economic and philosophical thought. As briefly noted in Chapter 3, spontaneous order refers to the emergence of stable and patterned forms of social organisation from the interactions of many individuals, without central planning or direct control. This idea has far-reaching implications for understanding complex

¹⁹¹ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. University of Chicago press, p.517

systems, including economies, legal orders, and other forms of collective human behaviour. As Hayek puts it:

It would be no exaggeration to say that social theory begins with—and has an object only because of—the discovery that there exist orderly structures which are the product of the action of many men but are not the result of human design. In some fields this is now universally accepted. Although there was a time when men believed that even language and morals had been invented by some genius of the past, everybody recognizes now that they are the outcome of a process of evolution whose results nobody foresaw or designed.¹⁹²

The idea of spontaneous order is not original to Hayek; it has deep roots in classical liberalism. Adam Smith's notion of the *invisible hand* laid the groundwork for understanding how self-interested actions can generate socially beneficial outcomes. Smith writes:

He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Hayek, F. A. von. (1982). *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A new statement of the liberal principles of justice and political economy*. Routledge, p.37

¹⁹³ Smith, A. (1976). *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 593-594. (Original work published in 1776)

While Smith first captured this insight, especially in relation to economic life, Hayek generalises and deepens it by emphasising that complex social orders emerge from individuals pursuing their own goals without any overarching plan. He writes:

It is because it was not dependent on organization but grew up as a spontaneous order that the structure of modern society has attained that degree of complexity which it possesses and which far exceeds any that could have been achieved by deliberate organization. In fact, of course, the rules which made the growth of this complex order possible were initially not designed in expectation of that result; but those people who happened to adopt suitable rules developed a complex civilization which then often spread to others.¹⁹⁴

For Hayek, the complexity of modern society does not result from a comprehensive blueprint imposed by a central authority, but from the gradual evolution of rules and practices that enable individuals to coordinate their actions. Institutions such as markets, languages, and legal systems arise through a process of cultural evolution: rules and norms are tested over time; those that prove effective in facilitating cooperation and adaptation tend to persist, while others fade away.¹⁹⁵

Central to this account is the idea that knowledge in society is dispersed and often tacit. No single planner can possess or process the information needed to coordinate economic activity at scale. The market, understood as a “catallaxy”—a system of voluntary exchanges—functions as a particular kind of spontaneous order, in which prices convey information about relative scarcities and preferences. Hayek defines catallaxy as:

¹⁹⁴ Hayek, F. A. von. (1982). *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A new statement of the liberal principles of justice and political economy*. London: Routledge, p.50

¹⁹⁵ Hayek, F. A. von. (1982). *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A new statement of the liberal principles of justice and political economy*. London: Routledge, pp. 45-46

[...] the special kind of spontaneous order produced by the market through people acting within the rules of the law of property, tort and contract.¹⁹⁶

Hayek's liberalism and his defence of free markets are therefore grounded in the claim that complex social orders can and do emerge from decentralised interactions, guided by a framework of general rules. The price system, operating within the legal order of property, contract, and tort, coordinates countless individual plans without central direction and, in principle, allocates resources efficiently.

However, this raises an important set of questions when we turn to the management of natural resources and environmental protection. Do free markets, even when understood as catallactic spontaneous orders, reliably ensure efficient and sustainable resource use? Can voluntary cooperation and exchange, driven by self-interest and mediated by price signals, guarantee that vital natural assets—landscapes, ecosystems, and species—are preserved rather than overexploited? How, for instance, is the free-market system to protect areas of natural beauty or fragile habitats that are crucial for ecological balance, when their value may not be adequately expressed in market prices? These questions frame the critical examination of Hayek's economic philosophy in the environmental context.

5.3 Criticisms of Hayek's Economic Philosophy

Despite its influence, Hayek's account of spontaneous order and the coordinating role of markets has been subject to significant criticism. Critics point out that markets do not always produce socially optimal outcomes, especially in the presence of market failures such as

¹⁹⁶ Hayek, F. A. von. (1982). *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A new statement of the liberal principles of justice and political economy*. London: Routledge, p.108

externalities, public goods, and monopolies. Samuel Bowles, Alan Kirman, and Rajiv Sethi (2017) emphasise that:

Market failures present significant challenges to the idea that decentralized decisions always yield socially optimal results.¹⁹⁷

These concerns become particularly acute in relation to natural resource management. Markets driven by self-interest and price signals often fail to internalise environmental externalities, leading to overuse and degradation of critical ecosystems. The tragedy of the commons—where individuals pursuing their own short-term advantage deplete shared resources—exposes a fundamental weakness in relying solely on spontaneous orders for resource governance. Public goods such as clean air, climate stability, and biodiversity generally lack straightforward price signals, and thus tend to be under-provided in a purely market-based system. Monopolistic or oligopolistic structures can further distort prices and incentives, generating patterns of resource use that are neither efficient nor environmentally sustainable.

Some scholars also question the predictability and stability of complex spontaneous orders, noting that such systems can exhibit sudden shifts, crises, or cascading failures. Scott Scheall (2015) observes that:

The unpredictability inherent in complex spontaneous orders raises concerns about their stability and the potential need for regulatory oversight.¹⁹⁸

In the environmental domain, where long-term ecological integrity is at stake, reliance on highly complex, decentralised processes without oversight can be particularly risky. Short-term

¹⁹⁷ Bowles, S., Kirman, A., & Sethi, R. (2017). Retrospectives: Friedrich Hayek and the market algorithm. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(3), 215-230.p.225

¹⁹⁸ Scheall, S. (2015). Hayek the apriorist? *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 37(4), 541-567.p.548

market incentives may encourage practices that are profitable in the immediate term but destructive over longer horizons.

Thus, while free markets and the concept of spontaneous order offer valuable insights into social evolution and economic coordination, uncritical trust in these mechanisms is unwarranted. Externalities, public goods problems, and market power can produce serious social and environmental harms. In the next subsection, I examine these issues more closely in Hayek's own discussion of agriculture and natural resource management. This analysis will highlight the complexities and limitations of applying free-market principles to environmental stewardship and underscore the need for a more balanced approach that integrates market mechanisms with appropriate forms of regulation and collective governance to secure sustainable resource use.

5.4 Agricultural Policy and Economic Growth: Farmers as Businessmen

Hayek did not devote extensive attention to environmental questions, but his economic philosophy offers a clear framework for understanding his approach to such issues. In this section, I focus on his essay *Agriculture and Natural Resources* (1960), in which he extends his general defence of free markets and limited government to the management of natural resources and agricultural practice. His argument provides an influential statement of how market mechanisms and property rights might be used to govern land use and farming. However, it is crucial to scrutinise both the limitations and the risks of this approach. Market mechanisms and property rights may contribute to resource management, but they are not panaceas. I argue that the monetisation of essential resources and the neglect of communal or non-market management models present serious challenges for both the environment and the communities affected by such an outlook.

5.4.1 Analysis of Hayek's Views on Agricultural Policy

Hayek's discussion in *Agriculture and Natural Resources* is grounded in the claim that individual liberty and market mechanisms are fundamental to prosperity. The essay addresses several key themes: the economic efficiency of free markets and technological adaptation in agriculture, the role of government in agricultural policy, and the place of private ownership in conservation and land use. As already noted in previous sections, Hayek holds that economic efficiency is best achieved through the operation of a free market in which prices are determined by supply and demand rather than by governmental fiat. Accordingly, in the agricultural domain he criticises state policies such as price controls and subsidies, arguing that they distort market signals and lead to inefficiencies and misallocation of resources.

A significant part of Hayek's argument concerns technological change in agriculture. He emphasises that innovations have dramatically increased productivity, enabling a smaller workforce to produce food for a larger population:

Technological advance has so increased the productivity of human effort in the production of food that fewer men than ever before can supply the needs of a larger population.¹⁹⁹

These developments, he notes, generate income disparities even among producers and have prompted increased governmental intervention. Hayek criticises modern agricultural policies as irrational and inefficient, asserting that extensive control undermines the adaptability and independence of farmers—qualities he regards as critical for their long-term success. He points to policies in the United States and Great Britain, where supervisory and regulatory powers over farming had, in his view, reached unprecedented and problematic levels.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. University of Chicago press, p.482

²⁰⁰ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. University of Chicago press, pp.485-487

At the same time, Hayek concedes that when farming is substantially conducted at public expense, the imposition of standards and controls is inevitable. Such measures, however, restrict farmers' capacity to respond flexibly to changing conditions. He challenges the assumption that agriculture will adjust more effectively under government direction, arguing that these restrictions foster dependency rather than resilience:

It is, however, a curious illusion to expect that farming will more effectively adapt itself to changing conditions if methods of cultivation are made subject to the control of a committee of neighbors and if what the majority or some superior authority regards as good farming is made the standard method universally enforced. Such restrictions may be the best way of preserving the kind of farming which we know and which many people (most of whom, one suspects, live in the city) wish to see preserved for sentimental reasons; but they can result only in the agricultural population's becoming more and more dependent.²⁰¹

For Hayek, reliance on government protection prevents farmers from making the "mental and technological adjustments" required to remain self-sufficient and economically viable. His conclusion is that, if farmers are to thrive, they must progressively become businessmen. This involves adopting new methods, technologies, and business practices in order to remain competitive and independent. Attempts to preserve farmers as they are—motivated by a desire to protect the familiar countryside—risk turning them into "permanent wards of government", dependent on public support and political decisions rather than their own initiative. Hayek warns:

As in all other fields, if there is to be a continuous adaptation to changing circumstances in agriculture, it is essential that the example of those individuals who are successful because they have discovered the appropriate response to a change be followed by the rest. This always means that certain types will disappear. In agriculture in particular, it means that

²⁰¹ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. University of Chicago press, p.487 (Original work published in 1960)

the farmer or peasant, if he is to succeed, must progressively become a businessman, a necessary process that many people deplore and want to prevent [...]. Such attempts to preserve particular members of the agricultural population by sheltering them against the necessity of changing strong traditions and habits must turn them into permanent wards of government, pensioners living off the rest of the population, and lastingly dependent for their livelihood on political decisions.²⁰²

He goes so far as to claim that it would show greater respect for human dignity to allow certain ways of life to disappear than to preserve them artificially:

Indeed, we should be showing more respect for the dignity of man if we allowed certain ways of life to disappear altogether instead of preserving them as specimens of a past age.²⁰³

Hayek's argument for the transformation of farmers into businessmen encapsulates his liberal free-market stance, which consistently prioritises economic viability over non-economic considerations. In doing so, it sidelines forms of conservation valued for their intrinsic worth, their cultural and historical significance, their role in sustaining community relationships and social cohesion, and their contribution to environmental sustainability. In the next subsection, I examine arguments that challenge Hayek's position and draw out the implications of a view that privileges economic considerations almost exclusively.

5.4.2 Economic Viability Versus Conservation Efforts

Hayek is right to criticise agricultural policies that generate dependency and inhibit innovation. However, his tendency to dismiss conservation efforts as mere sentimentality carries several important implications. First, his emphasis on economic efficiency and adaptability favours

²⁰² Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, pp.487-488

²⁰³ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, p.488

modern, industrial-scale farming methods over traditional practices, risking the loss of agricultural diversity and the marginalisation of small-scale farms that cannot compete with large agribusinesses. Second, if taken to its logical conclusion, his position could hasten the disappearance of culturally significant farming practices and rural landscapes, thereby eroding national heritage and diminishing the cultural richness of rural life. Third, prioritising short-term productivity may encourage industrial techniques that compromise long-term environmental sustainability, contributing to soil depletion, water pollution, and biodiversity loss. Finally, the reconceptualisation of farmers as businessmen may disrupt the social fabric of rural communities, undermining traditional values and social structures that have historically sustained them. Together, these implications point to the need for a more balanced approach to agricultural policy, one that integrates economic, cultural, environmental, and social dimensions.

Hayek's insistence that farmers should think and act as businessmen would likely lead to the abandonment of many traditional practices. This would weaken the intergenerational transmission of agricultural knowledge and undermine the sense of community and belonging such practices foster. A business-oriented outlook may bring certain economic gains, but it neglects sociological and ethical considerations. Eroding traditional practices not only disconnects individuals from their cultural heritage; it also diminishes the social cohesion and shared purpose that are integral to rural communities.

Conservation efforts, by contrast, aim to protect the cultural and historical heritage embedded in traditional farming methods and rural landscapes. These practices often embody centuries of locally adapted knowledge and cultural tradition. Ian Rotherham (2015) argues that preserving such practices maintains a vital link to the past, ensuring that future generations retain a tangible connection to their history and identity. This continuity strengthens communities' sense of belonging and contributes to the resilience of their social fabric.

Moreover, traditional farming methods can promote biodiversity and ecological balance. Their preservation can support sustainable agricultural practices that mitigate environmental degradation. Conservation thus helps to sustain soil health, water quality, and local ecosystems—conditions essential for long-term productivity and environmental stability. As Jules Pretty (2008) notes, sustainable agriculture is crucial not only for ecological integrity but also for the resilience of food systems in the face of climate change.

Conservation can also generate economic benefits, particularly through tourism. Sharon Phillip et al. (2010) argue that the aesthetic appeal of conserved rural landscapes attracts visitors, creating additional income streams for local communities. Tourists are drawn to picturesque countryside settings, traditional farming activities, and distinctive cultural landscapes. Agrotourism and rural tourism can support local businesses, create employment, and diversify rural economies beyond conventional agriculture.

Furthermore, rural communities often exhibit strong social bonds and a pronounced sense of solidarity. Conservation can help maintain these close-knit communities by limiting rural depopulation and sustaining traditional livelihoods. Rob Burton et al. (2013) suggest that preserving traditional farming strengthens social ties and fosters a shared identity, both of which are crucial for community stability. These communal dimensions are easily overlooked in narrowly economic assessments, yet they are essential for the holistic well-being of rural areas.

In sum, while Hayek's critique of state-dependent agricultural policies identifies genuine problems, conservation efforts contribute benefits that go well beyond economic calculus. By safeguarding cultural and historical heritage, promoting environmental sustainability, enabling economic diversification through tourism, and reinforcing community cohesion, conservation offers a more balanced alternative to a purely market-focused approach. This underscores the need for a nuanced agricultural policy that recognises both the intrinsic and extrinsic value of traditional practices, landscapes, and conservation.

5.5 Conservation of Natural Resources: Hayek's Free-Market Approach

In line with his treatment of agriculture, Hayek's views on conservation and natural resources reflect his broader economic philosophy. He is sceptical of extensive government intervention in resource management and argues that private ownership generally provides stronger incentives for responsible stewardship. In this section, I analyse Hayek's views on these issues and highlight the limitations of a reductionist perspective that tends to monetise natural resources.

5.5.1 Analysis of Hayek's Views on the Conservation of Natural Resources

A central theme in Hayek's discussion of resource management is the concept of dispersed knowledge. He maintains that the knowledge required to manage natural resources effectively is not concentrated in the hands of governments or central planners but is dispersed among countless individuals who possess local, context-specific information. This dispersion makes central planning inherently limited, because planners cannot acquire or process all the relevant details needed for efficient decision-making. He writes:

There will always exist, however, an even greater store of knowledge of special circumstances that ought to be taken into account in decisions about specific resources which only the individual owners will possess and which can never be concentrated within a single authority. Thus, if it is true that the government is likely to know some facts known to few others, it is equally true that the government will be necessarily ignorant of an even greater number of relevant facts known to some others. We can bring together all the knowledge that is relevant to particular problems only by dispersing downward the generic knowledge available to the government, not by centralizing all the special knowledge possessed by individuals. There is probably no instance where authority can possess superior knowledge of all the facts that ought to influence a specific decision; and, while it

is possible to communicate to the owners of particular resources the more general considerations that they ought to take into account, it is not possible for authority to learn all the different facts known to the individuals.²⁰⁴

This insight is continuous with Hayek's broader critique of centralised decision-making and his defence of decentralised, market-driven processes. Yet it sits uneasily alongside his earlier dismissal of traditional agricultural methods as mere sentimentality. The local knowledge possessed by farmers is itself the product of collective, intergenerational learning. Traditional practices often represent the cumulative refinement of techniques adapted to specific soils, climates, and ecosystems—precisely the kind of dispersed knowledge Hayek elsewhere praises.

For example, a farmer in northern England will, over time, develop practices suited to local weather patterns, soil conditions, and landscape features that differ markedly from those of a farmer in southern Spain. These tacit skills and understandings are embedded in traditional routines and community norms. When Hayek urges farmers to “become businessmen” and abandon older methods in favour of the latest technologies and market-driven innovations, he risks discarding forms of dispersed knowledge that are integral to the long-term adaptability of agricultural systems.

Dependence on government schemes is indeed problematic, but it is not obvious that the alternative is simply to align with large corporations and standardised technologies. Farmers could find themselves shifting from reliance on state support to reliance on agribusiness, credit institutions, and machinery suppliers. If dispersed knowledge is to be taken seriously, then some traditional practices—and the forms of local expertise they embody—should be recognised as valuable resources rather than redundant obstacles. In this light, Hayek's own concept of dispersed

²⁰⁴ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, p.494

knowledge points towards a more pluralistic understanding of resource management than his emphasis on commercial adaptation alone suggests.

5.5.2 Property Rights and Incentives

Another crucial element in Hayek's argument is the role of property rights in resource management. He contends that well-defined and secure property rights are essential for sustainable use. When individuals own resources, they have an incentive to manage them prudently and to invest in their long-term health. Hayek writes:

It is not to be denied that there has been real waste; it must be emphasized, however, that the most important instance of this—the depletion of the forests—was largely due to the fact that they did not become private property but were retained as public land and given over to private exploitation on terms which gave the exploiters no incentive for conservation.²⁰⁵

This argument clearly echoes Locke's defence of private property, discussed earlier in the thesis. Locke maintains that individuals will be more motivated to work and improve land when they own it than when it is held in common. As he famously puts it:

God gave the world to men in common; but since he gave it them for their benefit, and the greatest conveniences of life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational, (and labour was to be his title to it;) not to the fancy or covetousness of the quarrelsome and contentious.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, p.492

²⁰⁶ Locke, J., & Macpherson, C. B. (1980). *Second treatise of government* (1st ed). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co. Originally published in 1690.

Similarly, Hayek argues that private owners, acting in their own interest, are more likely to manage resources efficiently. Private property rights create accountability and give owners reason to consider the future value of their assets. On this view, the well-known “tragedy of the commons”—where common ownership leads to overuse and depletion because no one bears full responsibility—can be mitigated or avoided by assigning private property rights. Privatisation thus appears as a potential solution to commons problems.²⁰⁷

However, privatisation is not always practical, nor is it always desirable. In many cases, property rights are difficult to define or enforce. As Scheall (2015) notes, certain resources—such as the atmosphere or the oceans—cannot readily be privatised, which makes it hard to manage them through standard market mechanisms. Hayek himself recognises that some resources pose special challenges:

This problem arises in particular in connection with the various types of ‘fugitive resources,’ such as game, fish, water, oil, or natural gas (and perhaps rain, too, in the near future) which we can appropriate only by using them up and which no individual exploiter will have an interest in conserving, since what he does not take will be taken by others. They give rise to situations in which either private property cannot exist (as with deep-sea fisheries and most other forms of wild-life resources), and we have, in consequence, to find some substitute arrangement, or where private property will lead to rational use only if the scope of unified control is made coextensive with the range within which the same resource can be tapped, as with a pool of oil. It is undeniable that where for such technological reasons we cannot have exclusive control of particular resources by individual owners, we must resort to alternative forms of regulation.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, pp. 492-496

²⁰⁸ Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, p.492

Hayek thus acknowledges that there is no single, simple solution to resource management. Different types of resources require different arrangements, and in some cases regulation or alternative governance structures are necessary.

This opens the door to contrasting approaches, such as Elinor Ostrom's (1990) work on common-pool resources. Ostrom's research demonstrates that community-managed resources can be sustained effectively through collective management and shared incentives. Local users, she argues, often have a strong interest in maintaining the resource base and can design rules that are more practical and better enforced than those imposed from outside. As she writes:

When local users make decisions about rules affecting their own resources, they have a greater stake in the outcomes and are more likely to enforce rules, monitor usage, and design regulations that are practical and effective.²⁰⁹

Ostrom's analysis directly challenges the assumption that privatisation is the only, or even the best, solution for commons problems. It suggests that community-based systems, grounded in local knowledge and civic responsibility, can sometimes outperform both state and market-centred models. I explore these themes in greater depth in the following chapter, where I examine the tragedy of the commons and Ostrom's community-based solutions.

5.6 Critiques of Hayek's Free-Market Approach to Natural Resource Management

Hayek's work provides an important starting point for thinking about the intersection of free markets and natural resource management. Nonetheless, it is essential to assess the limitations and potential pitfalls of his approach. Market mechanisms and property rights can, under some conditions, aid in resource management, but they are not sufficient on their own. The monetisation

²⁰⁹ Ostrom, E. (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.100

of essential resources, the neglect or dismissal of communal management models, and the environmental and social externalities associated with market failures all raise serious concerns.

5.6.1 Reductionism and the Limits of Monetisation

A critical feature of Hayek's position is his tendency to reduce natural resources to their market value and to treat conservation as a form of investment to be evaluated by standard economic criteria. On this view, the value of a resource is primarily determined by its contribution to economic output or income. Such an outlook, however, has serious limitations. Not all natural resources can be meaningfully monetised. Clean air, for instance, is a fundamental condition of life and a paradigmatic public good. Because it is abundant, non-excludable, and essential, attempts to place a conventional market price on it either fail or produce perverse results.

More broadly, the commodification of basic environmental goods raises ethical concerns. Resources such as clean air, climate stability, and biodiversity provide immense value that cannot be fully captured in monetary terms. Treating them purely as commodities risks mismanagement and degradation, because market mechanisms typically do not account for the wider ecological and social benefits they confer. While markets may be useful in managing some types of resources, they are ill-suited to those that underpin life and well-being and whose value extends far beyond economic metrics.

5.6.2 Public Goods and Non-Excludability

Building on this point, many environmental goods—such as clean air and biodiversity—exhibit the characteristics of public goods. Modern public goods theory, developed from early insights by J. S. Mill, Ugo Mazzola, and Knut Wicksell, was systematically articulated by Paul Samuelson (1954), who described *collective consumption goods* as those:

[a good] which all enjoy in common in the sense that each individual's consumption of such a good leads to no subtractions from any other individual's consumption of that good.²¹⁰

This is the property of non-rivalry: one person's use does not diminish the availability of the good for others. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a canonical example; one person's enjoyment does not prevent others from appreciating the same work. The air we breathe is similarly non-rivalrous: individual respiration does not meaningfully reduce its availability to others. This contrasts with ordinary private goods such as bread, where consumption by one person directly reduces what remains for others.

A second key feature of public goods is non-excludability, elaborated by Richard Musgrave (1959). Non-excludability concerns whether people can be prevented from accessing a good. Some goods, such as private tennis courts, can be easily restricted, whereas others, such as public benches, are available to all irrespective of who funded them.²¹¹

Contemporary economic theory combines non-rivalry and non-excludability to define public goods. National defence is a standard example: its benefits do not diminish as more people are protected, and it is not feasible to exclude individuals selectively. By contrast, private goods such as clothing or housing are both rivalrous and excludable.

Natural resources complicate this picture. Some are non-excludable yet rivalrous. Fish stocks, for instance, are reduced by harvesting (rivalrous) but are often difficult to police (non-excludable), making them common-pool resources. Others, such as club goods (for example, a cinema screening or certain organisational services), are non-rivalrous but excludable. In the environmental realm, clean air and biodiversity are typically non-excludable and non-rivalrous:

²¹⁰ Reiss, Julian, "Public Goods", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/public-goods/>>. [accessed 20/07/24]

²¹¹ Reiss, Julian, "Public Goods", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/public-goods/>>. [accessed 20/07/24]

everyone can benefit from them, and one person's enjoyment does not diminish their availability. The atmosphere is thus a paradigmatic public good.

This brings us back to Hayek's framework and raises the question of whether free markets are well suited to managing such goods. Markets often fail to provide public goods at adequate levels because non-excludability prevents providers from charging all beneficiaries, and non-rivalry means that marginal cost is effectively zero. Without some form of collective action or intervention, there is little incentive for private actors to invest in preserving public environmental goods. The conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems frequently requires coordinated efforts and funding that private markets alone are unlikely to sustain.

Hayek acknowledges that voluntary organisations, such as the National Trust in the United Kingdom, may be better suited than government agencies to manage certain environmental amenities. He writes:

The case for natural parks, nature reservations, etc., is exactly of the same sort as that for similar amenities which municipalities provide on a smaller scale. There is much to be said for their being provided as far as possible by voluntary organizations, such as the National Trust in Great Britain, rather than through the compulsory powers of government.²¹²

This concession is significant. It recognises that some valuable goods cannot be adequately handled by normal market processes and require institutional arrangements that are neither straightforwardly *market* nor straightforwardly *state*. It also underlines the need to move beyond a purely market-oriented perspective and to consider the role of membership-based associations and public bodies in ensuring the provision and protection of public environmental goods.

²¹² Hayek, F. A. von. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty: The definitive edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, p.497

5.6.3 Market Failures and Externalities

A further limitation of Hayek's market-oriented approach to natural resource management lies in its treatment of environmental externalities. Markets often fail to internalise the environmental costs of production—such as pollution, deforestation, and resource depletion. When externalities are not reflected in prices, consumers and producers receive distorted signals about the true costs of their actions.

For example, agricultural producers may minimise costs by adopting practices that degrade soil health or contaminate water supplies, generating long-term harm that is not borne by the producer alone. Empirical studies in environmental science identify agricultural runoff as a major contributor to water pollution, with serious consequences for human health and aquatic ecosystems. Similarly, patterns of deforestation—such as those documented in the Amazon—are often driven by policies and market incentives that reward land conversion for cattle pasture or feed crops, while ignoring the climate, biodiversity, and social impacts. The destruction of forest cover disrupts local and global water cycles, accelerates greenhouse gas emissions, and undermines the livelihoods and cultural integrity of indigenous communities. In such cases, market prices systematically underestimate environmental costs, leading to ecologically destructive outcomes.²¹³

Environmental externalities also have a distributive dimension. Industrial pollution and hazardous waste disposal frequently impose disproportionate burdens on low-income and marginalised communities. A purely market-based system, lacking mechanisms to address these inequities, risks perpetuating environmental injustice.

²¹³ Greenberg C., (2022), How Deforestation is pushing the Amazon to a Climate Tipping Point, Amazon Rainforest Facts: Deforestation, Fires, and Climate. Retrieved from <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/55359/amazon-rainforest-facts-deforestation-fires-climate/> [Accessed 23/07/24]

More generally, market-driven approaches tend to prioritise short-term profits over long-term ecological sustainability. Firms operating under competitive pressure may favour practices that maximise immediate financial returns even when these undermine the resilience of ecosystems—through the overuse of chemical fertilisers, monoculture cropping, or habitat destruction. Sustainable practices, which often require higher upfront investment and deliver benefits over longer time horizons, are likely to be underused in a system governed by short-term profit signals alone.

In summary, Hayek's emphasis on market mechanisms and property rights yields important insights into resource allocation and the limits of central planning. However, its limitations become evident when confronted with environmental challenges. The tendency to monetise natural resources underestimates the intrinsic value of public goods such as clean air and biodiversity; the public-good character of many environmental assets reveals the inadequacy of unregulated markets; and the prevalence of externalities and market failures shows that reliance on price signals alone cannot ensure environmentally responsible outcomes.

At the same time, it remains important to ask whether, and to what extent, Hayek's principles can be reconciled with the demands of sustainable resource management. Is it possible to strike a balance between a free-market economy, which tends to prioritise profit maximisation and intensive resource use, and forms of environmental stewardship that stress intergenerational responsibility and ecological limits? The next stage of the thesis, beginning with the analysis of the tragedy of the commons and Ostrom's work in Chapter 6, addresses these questions directly by exploring alternative models of resource governance grounded in community, shared norms, and civic responsibility.

5.7 Reconciling Hayekian Economics with Sustainable Resource Management

As previously discussed, Hayek is a strong advocate of spontaneous order in markets and society and is deeply sceptical of extensive state control. This reflects his conviction that markets are superior in their capacity for adaptation and problem-solving, and that government interventions often stifle innovation and disrupt the emergence of organic solutions. Yet he pays comparatively little attention to the disruption that human economic activity causes to nature's own spontaneous orders. This raises a critical question: how can Hayek insist on the value and fragility of spontaneous order in the market while largely overlooking the analogous fragility of natural ecosystems?

Andrew Gamble (2021) draws this tension into sharp focus by explicitly paralleling Hayek's conception of the market order with environmentalists' understanding of the natural world, emphasising the delicacy and complexity of both systems. He writes:

The way in which Hayek approaches the social world is paralleled in the way in which many environmentalists approach the natural world. Both are conceived as extremely delicate, living organisms which have evolved in particular ways and whose operations are imperfectly understood. Human interventions that alter the balance risk destroying the forces that create and sustain the order on which all human life depends. Hayek treats the market order similarly as a social ecosystem which we interfere with at our peril. What he does not address directly is whether the market order is compatible with the natural ecosystem. A liberal market order of the kind Hayek advocates permits constant interference in the natural ecosystem through the ways in which natural resources are acquired and utilised to sustain modern industry and urban lifestyles. Can a liberal market system generate spontaneously in time the innovations, new rules and changes in behaviour

necessary to prevent the fatal undermining of the ecosphere on which all human activity ultimately depends?²¹⁴

Hayek's scepticism toward intervention is grounded in a belief in the self-regulating capacities of markets. Gamble's question is why this reasoning is not extended to natural systems, which are themselves complex, adaptive orders. Contemporary environmental problems—deforestation, biodiversity loss, climate change—demonstrate that market-driven economic activity can severely disrupt ecological balances. Gamble therefore questions whether a liberal market order of the kind Hayek defends is compatible with the long-term integrity of natural ecosystems. He suggests that the global neoliberal economy can be read as a success for Hayekian principles at the level of economic organisation, but that this very success now poses a sterner test:

The contemporary global economy based on neo-liberal rules is a success for Hayekian principles. But whether Hayekian principles can preserve the ecosystem poses a new and sterner test, because he never extended to natural science and technology his critique of constructivist rationalism in social science. Although rationalism has retreated in the social sphere, it still has few restraints in its quest to master and control the natural world, posing increasingly serious questions for the civilisation that Hayek so valued.²¹⁵

On Gamble's reading, Hayek does not adequately confront the fact that a liberal market order permits, and indeed encourages, systematic interference with the natural world. Nor does he fully explore how his critique of rationalist, constructivist planning in social affairs might apply to technological projects aimed at *mastering* nature. The result is a tension between Hayek's appreciation of the limits of human knowledge in social systems and his relative silence about similar limits in ecological systems.

²¹⁴ Gamble, A. (2021). *Hayek on Knowledge, Economics and Society*. Bristol University Press, p.98

²¹⁵ Gamble, A. (2021). *Hayek on Knowledge, Economics and Society*. Bristol University Press, p.98

Other scholars, however, argue that Hayekian economic philosophy retains significant potential for addressing environmental challenges. Mark Sagoff (2021), in *What Would Hayek Do About Climate Change?*, suggests that Hayek's principle of dispersed knowledge could offer a fruitful way of thinking about climate policy. Sagoff begins by noting various technological developments—from renewable energy technologies to advances in synthetic biology—but characterises climate change as a “wicked problem”: complex, contested, and not reducible to straightforward questions of resource scarcity. He argues that mainstream economic models, which assume that scarcity drives prices up and induces efficiency or substitution, are ill-suited to climate change. The problem is not primarily scarcity of fossil fuels, but the cumulative impact of their abundant use and the atmosphere's capacity to absorb greenhouse gases.²¹⁶

Sagoff is also critical of standard economic solutions such as carbon pricing (taxes or cap-and-trade). He argues that these instruments often rest on theoretical assumptions rather than robust evidence about their effectiveness in driving technological change. Political and regulatory uncertainties further limit their impact.

He then contrasts this with a more Hayekian perspective, according to which economic problems are not simply about efficient allocation but about discovery: the use and generation of dispersed knowledge through innovation and entrepreneurship. For Hayek, prices co-ordinate existing knowledge, but new knowledge arises through creative experimentation. Sagoff argues that, applied to climate change, this suggests a shift of focus from designing optimal price instruments to fostering the conditions under which innovation in clean technologies can flourish. On this view, climate policy would be less about calibrating carbon prices and more about enabling

²¹⁶ Sagoff, M. (2021). What Would Hayek Do About Climate Change The Breakthrough Institute. *Breakthrough Magazine*, 13. <https://thebreakthrough.org/journal/no-13-winter-2021/what-would-hayek-do-about-climate-change>

decentralised experimentation, reducing barriers to new entrants, and supporting the diffusion of low-carbon technologies.

Sagoff thus challenges the adequacy of mainstream, allocation-focused economic approaches to climate change and proposes a Hayekian framework that emphasises decentralised knowledge and innovation. While this remains broadly faithful to Hayek's economic theory, it also pushes it in a more explicitly environmental direction, raising the question of how far Hayekian principles can be adapted to address ecological limits and long-term risks.

Romain Felli (2015) offers another perspective by reading emissions trading as a paradigmatically neoliberal policy instrument grounded in Hayekian assumptions. Emissions trading schemes establish a cap on total allowable emissions and create tradable pollution permits. For Felli, this approach is designed to reconcile environmental constraints with continued economic growth and capital accumulation. It does so by turning pollution rights into commodities and relying on the market to allocate them efficiently, thereby *depoliticising* decisions about who may emit and how much. In this sense, emissions trading embodies the belief that environmental problems can be managed within a market framework without challenging the underlying structures of production and consumption.

However, as Felli's analysis suggests, such mechanisms reproduce the same difficulties discussed earlier in this chapter: they place considerable trust in market processes, while externalities, power asymmetries, and public-goods problems remain insufficiently addressed. Emissions trading may internalise some costs, but it can also entrench existing inequalities and encourage a technocratic, commodified view of nature.

Taken together, these debates show that Hayekian ideas can be mobilised both to criticise and to defend market-based environmental policies. They also underscore the central question animating this chapter: whether the Hayekian commitment to spontaneous order, dispersed knowledge, and

market coordination can be reconciled with the demands of sustainable resource management, or whether more robust forms of civic, communal, and political responsibility are required.

5.8 Summary and Concluding Reflections

This chapter has examined Hayek's economic philosophy and its application to agriculture, conservation, and natural resource management, thereby deepening the analysis of the neoliberal paradigm introduced in the previous chapter. It has shown how Hayek extends his defence of free markets and private property into the environmental domain, arguing that market mechanisms and clearly defined property rights can, in many cases, promote efficient and responsible resource use. At the same time, it has identified significant limitations in this framework when confronted with the complexities of environmental goods and ecological systems.

Hayek's reliance on market value tends to overlook the intrinsic and ecological significance of resources that resist monetisation. The conservation of biodiversity, ecosystem services, and basic environmental conditions such as clean air and water is indispensable for long-term sustainability, yet these goods are not easily or appropriately captured in price signals. Moreover, his suspicion of government intervention underestimates the role that coordinated public action can play in protecting public goods, addressing market failures, and ensuring fair access to environmental amenities. The preservation of national parks, historical landscapes, and areas of scientific or cultural significance often depends on collective funding and institutional support that private markets alone are unlikely to provide.

At the same time, my purpose here has not been to propose comprehensive solutions to global problems such as climate change or ocean pollution. These challenges clearly require international cooperation and complex forms of governance. Hayekian free-market approaches, particularly when they foster innovation and technological change, may contribute to addressing some aspects of these issues. However, I have argued that environmentalism, at its core, belongs

to the sphere of *civic* responsibility: it involves the cultivation of certain virtues and begins with the attitudes, practices, and institutions of individuals and communities.

The analysis of Hayek in this chapter therefore performs a specific role in the broader argument of the thesis. It shows both the reach and the limits of neoliberal economic reasoning when applied to environmental questions. It highlights how the economic man, even in a more moderate Hayekian form, remains primarily a market actor, and how this perspective tends to marginalise questions of membership, loyalty, and shared obligation. This sets the stage for the next chapter, which turns directly to the tragedy of the commons—a problem exacerbated by unchecked individualism—and argues that free-market solutions are insufficient to resolve it.

Chapter 6 examines the tragedy of the commons and Elinor Ostrom's work on community-based solutions. In doing so, it introduces the concepts of belonging, loyalty, and community membership as central to understanding how environmental challenges arise and how they might be prevented. This analysis leads towards a broader conclusion: that the liberal conception of the self—understood as an unencumbered, market-oriented individual—has undermined the idea of membership and community participation and thereby eroded civic responsibility.

Subsequent chapters develop this line of argument by drawing on particular Aristotelian virtues, such as *phronēsis*, and Roger Scruton's notion of *oikophilia*, examining their role in fostering civic responsibility. The aim is to articulate an account of *civic virtue environmentalism* in which love of home, attachment to place, the realisation of one's role within a larger whole, and participation in community life and shared purposes form the foundations of a more ethically robust and environmentally responsible alternative to the economic man.

Chapter 6

Addressing the Tragedy of the Commons and the Role of Community in Managing Natural and Common-Pool Resources

6.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter exposed the limitations of Hayek's free-market approach to conservation and natural resource management. Of particular interest, given their complex dynamics, are common-pool resources. At first sight, a neoliberal or libertarian paradigm might seem to offer solutions rooted in private property rights and incentives. Yet this framework is vulnerable to fundamental critique. The well-known phenomenon of the *tragedy of the commons*, articulated by Garrett Hardin in his seminal 1968 essay *The Tragedy of the Commons in Science*, provides a powerful lens through which to assess the consequences of unrestricted access to shared resources (Hardin, 1968). The tragedy captures the destructive pattern whereby individuals, acting in self-interest, collectively overexploit and degrade communal resources. In the case of natural resources—fisheries, forests, grazing lands, or air quality—unregulated access often precipitates precisely such spirals of overuse and environmental harm.

This poses an immediate challenge to the straightforward application of free-market principles to resource management. Can the invisible hand of the market, with its emphasis on private initiative and property rights, adequately address the collective-action problems associated with common-pool resources? As noted in the previous chapter, free markets, for all their allocative efficiency in certain domains, falter when individual actors or profit-driven firms lack sufficient incentives to conserve shared resources. The misalignment between private interest and the collective good creates a vacuum in stewardship.

Effective management of common resources generally requires more than decentralised individual choice; it calls for forms of co-ordination, regulation, and institutional design, often at

a local level, to secure sustainable use and fair distribution. This requirement cuts against the grain of strong free-market orthodoxy and forces us to think about resource governance beyond the paradigm of supply and demand alone. Preserving shared natural goods demands a careful balancing of individual rights with responsibilities to others—a balance that unregulated markets struggle to maintain.

In this chapter, I begin with a reconstruction of Hardin's argument, initially framed in terms of population growth, and then extend the analysis to common-pool resources more broadly, with examples from fisheries, forests, and air quality. This clarifies the destructive potential of unchecked self-interest and profit-seeking in the context of shared environmental goods.

Having set out these problems, I turn to the question of how the tragedy of the commons might be averted. This leads to a critical examination of Elinor Ostrom's work on governing the commons, and in particular to her community-based models for managing common-pool resources (Ostrom, 1990). I suggest that Ostrom's approach offers a more robust framework than market-led, property-based solutions of the sort favoured by neoliberal theorists. However, my concern is not limited to institutional design. I treat Ostrom's paradigm as a springboard for exploring deeper philosophical and social questions: Why do community-based arrangements often outperform purely market-based ones in environmental stewardship? What does the tragedy of the commons reveal about our conception of individual morality, freedom, and citizenship?

My investigation suggests that the tragedy of the commons is not simply an economic or environmental problem, but also a symptom of a broader ethical and philosophical deficit in how we understand individual rights and responsibilities within communities. By contrasting Ostrom's findings with the failures of unfettered individualism, I prepare the ground for a shift in environmental ethos. The chapter thus contributes directly to the central thesis: the need for a form of civic virtue environmentalism rooted in community membership, civic responsibility, and

virtue. I argue that such an approach offers a more sustainable and ethically convincing framework for environmental stewardship than the self-interested paradigm of neoliberal individualism.

The questions raised here will orient the subsequent chapters as I explore how civic virtue environmentalism might be cultivated, how our relationship with the natural world and our surroundings might be reconceived, and how citizenship might be recovered in an era of global environmental challenges. My aim is not to specify detailed governance blueprints for every type of common resource—Ostrom and others have already advanced that discussion considerably—but to catalyse a shift in environmental attitudes: from a paradigm of individual exploitation to one of shared responsibility and civic virtue.

6.2 The Tragedy of the Commons and Its Application to Environmental Challenges

6.2.1 Hardin's Argument in The Tragedy of the Commons

The central claim of Hardin's argument in *The Tragedy of the Commons* is that individually rational behaviour can yield collectively irrational outcomes—a paradox that becomes especially vivid in the context of common resources (Hardin, 1968). Hardin introduces this claim through the “population problem,” which he insists has “no technical solution”:

A technical solution may be defined as one that requires a change only in the techniques of the natural sciences, demanding little or nothing in the way of change in human values or ideas of morality.²¹⁷

This distinction sets the stage for a broader argument about the limits of technological fixes when underlying moral and social structures remain unchanged. Hardin's starting point is the exponential nature of population growth, drawing on Thomas Malthus's classic insight that

²¹⁷Hardin, G. (1968). The Tragedy of the Commons: The population problem has no technical solution; it requires a fundamental extension in morality. *Science*, 162(3859), 1243–1248, p.1243

population tends to increase more rapidly than the resources required to sustain it (Malthus, 1798).²¹⁸ In a finite world, unrestrained population growth leads to a declining per capita share of goods. For Hardin, this fact implies that population growth must ultimately stabilise at or near zero if catastrophic resource depletion is to be avoided.

Hardin denies that technological progress can, by itself, resolve this problem. Advances that increase food production may temporarily expand the Earth's carrying capacity, but they do not address what he takes to be the root cause: the unsustainable use of shared resources in the absence of effective restraints on individual behaviour. This is why he calls for a "fundamental extension in morality": a shift in human values that acknowledges the limits of the Earth's resources and the necessity of collective action and constraint.

6.2.2 The Concept of the Commons and Its Application

Central to Hardin's argument—and crucial for the present thesis—is the notion of the *commons*. He employs the now-famous metaphor of a common pasture open to all herdsmen. Each herdsman, acting rationally from the standpoint of self-interest, has an incentive to add more cattle to the pasture: he receives the full benefit of the additional animal, while the costs of overgrazing are diffused across all users. When every herdsman reasons in this way, the cumulative effect is overgrazing and, ultimately, the destruction of the pasture.

This scenario encapsulates the tragedy of the commons. It is tragic because the pursuit of individual gain leads to the degradation of a resource upon which all depend. It is not a tragedy of malice, but of rational action in a particular institutional context. The key insight is that individual rationality does not necessarily promote collective well-being when resources are finite

²¹⁸ Malthus, T. (1998). *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Chicago: Electronic Scholarly Publishing Project. Originally published in 1798
<https://math.uchicago.edu/~shmuel/Modeling/Malthus,%20An%20essay%20on%20the%20principle%20of%20population.pdf>

and shared. Rational self-interest, under conditions of open access, can be collectively self-destructive.

This directly challenges optimistic readings of Adam Smith's notion of the *invisible hand*, according to which individuals, by pursuing their own interest, unintentionally serve the public good. Smith writes:

He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it.²¹⁹

On one hand, neoliberal economic thought takes up this Smithian insight as a defence of the self-regulating power of markets, assuming that individuals motivated by self-interest will tend, in aggregate, to promote socially desirable outcomes. On this view, the *invisible hand* co-ordinates private decisions in ways that benefit society, rendering external regulation suspect or unnecessary. On the other hand, the tragedy of the commons provides a powerful counterexample. It shows that when access to resources is unrestricted and institutional safeguards are absent, the pursuit of individual advantage can lead to collective ruin.

²¹⁹ Smith, A. (1976). *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.593-594.

Hardin's argument thus marks a critical departure from more optimistic strands of classical and neoliberal economic thought. It exposes the limits of laissez-faire approaches in contexts where the structure of incentives drives individuals towards patterns of use that are unsustainable for the community as a whole.

6.2.3 Population Control and the Limits of Freedom

Hardin's most controversial application of the tragedy of the commons concerns population control. He argues that the "freedom to breed," if left unchecked, will lead to overpopulation and the collapse of shared resources. Historically, high mortality rates limited population growth. Modern improvements in medicine and public health have reduced mortality without an automatic corresponding decline in fertility, creating what Hardin sees as a structurally unsustainable dynamic (Hardin, 1968).

To prevent a tragedy of the commons in population, Hardin concludes that society must, in some measure, relinquish the unrestricted freedom to reproduce. He argues that appeals to individual conscience are unlikely to be effective and therefore advocates "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon" as a means of regulating reproduction. Such coercion might take the form of laws or policies that limit the number of children families may have.

This proposal is ethically contentious, since it involves curtailing personal freedoms in the name of a putative common good. In this respect, Hardin's position can be read as a form of utilitarian reasoning: he is prepared to limit individual liberty in order to secure the greatest good for the greatest number. Yet he also acknowledges the difficulty of specifying what the "greatest good" entails and how to balance individual rights against collective interests in practice.

6.2.4 Critiques of Hardin's Argument about the Tragedy of the Commons

At the heart of Hardin's essay stands a Malthusian vision of environmental catastrophe, in which unchecked population growth and unregulated access to shared resources lead inexorably to depletion and collapse. While his synthesis of Malthusian ideas and resource management was innovative, subsequent scholarship has raised serious objections to both the determinism and the simplifications built into his model.

A prominent line of critique targets the fatalism of Hardin's account. By presenting the tragedy as an almost unavoidable outcome of rational self-interest under conditions of open access, he appears to deny the possibility that human beings might develop institutional arrangements that enable co-operation and restraint. Ostrom (1990) argues that this underestimates the capacity of communities to devise and enforce rules that sustain common-pool resources over time. Her empirical work documents numerous cases in which users of shared resources do, in fact, co-operate successfully.

Critics also contend that Hardin's model oversimplifies the complexity of social-ecological systems. Arun Agrawal (2002) emphasises the importance of local institutional diversity and context-specific knowledge in explaining why some commons are managed sustainably while others are not. Fikret Berkes's (1985) study of Turkish coastal fisheries shows that local communities can and do develop effective self-governing institutions, relying on cultural norms, traditional ecological knowledge, and shared practices. Hardin's stylised pasture neglects these dimensions, as well as the influence of technology and markets on resource use.

In addition, patterns of consumption play a crucial role in resource depletion. Even if population growth were stabilised, cultures of overconsumption and waste could continue to place intolerable pressure on common-pool resources. Hardin's focus on population therefore does not fully address the ways in which affluent consumption patterns drive environmental degradation.

A further criticism concerns his advocacy of “mutual coercion” in the sphere of reproduction. Dietz et al. (2003) argue that coercive population policies risk violating human rights and are likely to fall most heavily on vulnerable populations. They highlight the ethical and political dangers of proposals that treat reproductive freedom as an expendable cost in the name of resource preservation.²²⁰

Despite these significant objections, Hardin’s essay remains influential as a conceptual starting point for thinking about common-pool resources and collective action. His core insight—that individual rationality, under certain conditions, can generate collectively irrational outcomes—continues to frame debates in environmental ethics, political theory, and institutional design. In this thesis, I treat Hardin’s paradigm as a heuristic for analysing the tension between individual freedom and responsibility in the preservation of commons, while also arguing that his pessimism about co-operation and his narrow focus on population must be revised in light of Ostrom’s work on community-based governance and the broader civic perspective developed in later chapters.

6.3 When Commons Fail: Natural Resource Depletion Scenarios

Hardin’s essay focuses principally on population, but the logic of the tragedy of the commons extends far beyond demographic pressures. The same structure of incentives that leads to the overuse of a shared pasture applies to other common-pool resources such as fisheries, forests, and the atmosphere. In each case, individual actions motivated by self-interest can generate outcomes that are collectively destructive.

These dynamics raise doubts about the adequacy of laissez-faire approaches to the governance of common-pool resources. Where access is weakly regulated or effectively open, the *natural* tendency towards self-interest can easily result in environmental degradation and resource

²²⁰ Dietz, T., Ostrom, E., & Stern, P. C. (2003). The struggle to govern the commons. *Science*, 302(5652), 1907-1912.

depletion. This suggests the need for institutional arrangements and regulatory frameworks that go beyond simple market ordering.

6.3.1 Overfishing: The Tragedy of the Marine Commons

Stephanie McWhinnie's (2009) empirical study of international fisheries offers powerful evidence of the tragedy of the commons at work in the management of marine resources. Her analysis bridges the gap between Hardin's theoretical model and concrete environmental outcomes, showing how the dynamics he describes manifest in global fisheries.

McWhinnie finds a clear association between broader access to shared fish stocks and patterns of overexploitation. As more states and fleets gain access to the same stocks, fishing pressure intensifies and depletion accelerates. This pattern closely mirrors Hardin's pasture example: each actor, seeking to maximise its own economic gains, increases its effort, while the ecological costs are diffused across all users and the ecosystem itself. The result is a collectively irrational outcome produced by individually rational decisions (McWhinnie, 2009).

The significance of McWhinnie's work lies not only in its confirmation of Hardin's basic insight, but in its explicitly quantitative character. By documenting the relationship between access and depletion, she demonstrates that the tragedy of the commons is not merely a heuristic but a real and pressing problem in contemporary resource management.

Her findings also underscore the limitations of relying solely on market-based mechanisms to govern common-pool resources. The international fisheries she analyses do not fit easily into standard property-rights frameworks: jurisdiction is often fragmented, enforcement is uneven, and incentives to free-ride or overexploit are strong. In such settings, economic incentives alone do not reliably secure conservation. This aligns with broader debates in environmental economics about the need for institutional arrangements that combine market instruments with forms of co-operation and regulation.

Because her focus is on large-scale international fisheries, McWhinnie's study naturally highlights the importance of international co-ordination. It does not, however, explore in detail the potential of local, community-based governance arrangements. This omission reflects the scope of the study rather than a rejection of such approaches. It therefore leaves space for further work—such as Ostrom's—to examine how local institutions might complement or, in some contexts, offer more effective alternatives to purely international or market-led management.

Taken together, McWhinnie's research provides robust empirical support for the relevance of Hardin's model in contemporary marine resource management. It offers a data-centred illustration of how individually rational strategies can generate collectively damaging outcomes and thus provides a useful platform from which to consider more diverse and multi-level governance responses.²²¹

6.3.2 Resource Overexploitation in Nigeria: Economic Necessity, Regulatory Gaps, and the Commons Dilemma

The widespread deforestation of Nigeria's forests provides another concrete illustration of the tragedy of the commons. Chukwuma Otum (2017), in his analysis of deforestation and the commons in Nigeria, argues that forest resources there are frequently treated as open-access: effectively available to all, but owned and managed by no one in a meaningful sense.²²²

According to Otum (2017), this absence of clearly defined property rights or effective management structures creates conditions that closely reflect Hardin's model. Individuals and groups, acting under significant economic pressure, exploit forest resources with little regard for long-term sustainability. Poverty and the lack of viable alternative livelihoods intensify this dynamic. Local communities often depend heavily on forests for fuelwood, small-scale agriculture,

²²¹McWhinnie, S. F. (2009). The tragedy of the commons in international fisheries: An empirical examination. *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, 57(3), 321–333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeem.2008.07.008>

²²² Chukwuma Otum, U. (2017). Tragedy of the Commons and Economics of Deforestation in Nigeria. *Journal of Biodiversity Management & Forestry*, 06(01). <https://doi.org/10.4172/2327-4417.1000175>

and commercial timber. In such circumstances, it is individually rational to extract as much as possible, particularly when there is a real fear that others will do the same.

Weak regulatory frameworks and poor enforcement compound the problem. Otum notes that environmental laws and policies are often either insufficient, inconsistently applied, or undermined by corruption and limited state capacity. In practice, this means that there are few effective constraints on logging, land clearance, or fuelwood collection. In Hardin's terms, the "freedom" to exploit the commons is preserved, but at the cost of accelerating degradation.

The environmental consequences are serious: loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, changes in local hydrological and climatic conditions, and declining agricultural productivity. These impacts are cumulative and interlinked, illustrating the collective price paid for short-term individual gain. As forests are degraded, communities often become more vulnerable economically and ecologically, which can in turn prompt further exploitation of what remains—a vicious cycle characteristic of a commons in decline.

In this context, any solution must address both the ecological and the socio-economic dimensions of the problem. Otum points towards measures such as community-based forest management, stronger and more effectively enforced environmental regulations, and the development of alternative livelihood options that reduce direct dependency on forests (Otum, 2017). These suggestions already anticipate the kind of community-centred and institutional approaches that will be taken up in the discussion of Ostrom.

The Nigerian case thus reinforces the contemporary relevance of the tragedy of the commons. It illustrates how, in the absence of effective institutions and viable alternatives, rational responses to economic necessity can drive environmental decline, and highlights the need for governance strategies that link conservation with social and economic resilience.

6.3.3 Fashion's Footprint: The Invisible Commons of Clean Air

The global fashion industry provides a further, more diffuse illustration of commons-like dynamics, this time in relation to the atmosphere. Although not a textbook example of Hardin's pasture, practices such as chronic overproduction and the incineration of unsold garments can be understood as contributing to the overuse of a shared environmental sink: the capacity of the air to absorb pollutants without severe harm.

At the core lies the same tension between individual and collective outcomes. Fashion companies, operating under conditions of intense competition and uncertain demand, often overproduce in order to minimise the risk of stockouts and lost sales. From the standpoint of an individual firm, overproduction and subsequent disposal can appear economically rational. However, when many firms act similarly, the cumulative environmental costs—resource use, emissions, and waste—become substantial. Reports such as those on H&M's incineration of unsold stock highlight how ostensibly rational business practices generate broader ecological harms.²²³

In this context, the *commons* at stake is the atmosphere and related environmental systems. The overexploitation takes the form of excessive greenhouse gas emissions, air pollutants from production and disposal, and the broader ecological footprint of fast fashion. As in traditional commons scenarios, costs are externalised: firms capture the private benefits of production and risk management, while society bears the environmental consequences. Responsibility is diffuse and often difficult to assign to particular actors, which further weakens incentives for change.

Short-termism reinforces this pattern. The drive for rapid turnover, seasonal trends, and continual growth encourages decisions that prioritise immediate profit over long-term environmental sustainability. As the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) has noted, if current

²²³ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/business/hm-clothes-stock-sales.html> [accessed November 2024]

trajectories continue, the fashion industry's share of global carbon emissions could become very substantial, raising questions about its compatibility with climate stabilisation goals.²²⁴

Regulatory challenges are significant. Fashion supply chains are geographically dispersed and embedded in complex trade and investment regimes. This makes it difficult to design and enforce effective environmental regulation, especially where states are reluctant to impose constraints that might affect competitiveness. These governance difficulties mirror those found in more traditional commons, where there is a persistent struggle to align individual and collective interests.

The externalisation of environmental costs in this sector thus closely resembles the distribution of burdens in classic commons cases. While firms and consumers benefit from low prices and rapid product cycles, the environmental and social costs are widely shared, often disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities and ecosystems.

Addressing this contemporary variant of the commons problem requires mechanisms that re-align corporate incentives with environmental objectives. Possible measures include more accurate internalisation of environmental costs (for example through extended producer responsibility schemes), investment in circular-economy models that reduce waste and encourage reuse and recycling, and regulatory frameworks that discourage routine incineration or landfill disposal of unsold goods. Consumer-facing initiatives, including labelling and awareness campaigns, may also contribute by reshaping demand.

Although the fashion industry's impact on air quality and climate does not fit Hardin's model in every respect, it shares key structural features: dispersed actors, externalised costs, and a shared environmental medium under stress. As such, it serves as a useful contemporary case for

²²⁴ Ellen MacArthur Foundation, (2017), *A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future*.

thinking about how commons-like problems arise in complex, globalised contexts, and why purely market-based responses are unlikely to be sufficient.

6.4 The Failure of the Commons: Reflections on Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons

The case studies of overfishing, deforestation in Nigeria, and the fashion industry's contribution to air pollution demonstrate the continuing relevance of Hardin's notion of the tragedy of the commons. Despite extensive criticism, his framework still illuminates the structural tensions that characterise common-pool resource management. The core claim—that individually rational behaviour can result in collectively disastrous outcomes when resources are shared—extends well beyond Hardin's original focus on population growth to a wide range of contemporary environmental challenges.

Each case illustrates a different aspect of the commons dilemma. In international fisheries, the classic pattern appears clearly: states and fleets, seeking to maximise their catch, contribute to the depletion of marine ecosystems. In Nigeria, local economic pressures, together with weak governance and poorly enforced regulations, drive deforestation and the degradation of forest ecosystems that function as vital common resources. The fashion industry presents a more diffuse and contemporary variant, where the shared resource—clean air and a stable climate—is less visible yet essential, and the cumulative impacts of overproduction and waste disposal are spread across societies and generations. In each instance, short-term individual or corporate gains are pursued at the expense of long-term collective interests.

However, it would be misleading to read these scenarios as demonstrating an inescapable, deterministic tragedy. To do so would be to replicate the fatalism often attributed to Hardin's original essay. The persistence and complexity of commons problems point instead to the need for more nuanced accounts of how, and under what conditions, shared resources can be governed sustainably. This is where Ostrom's work becomes especially important. Her research challenges

the assumption that common-pool resources are either doomed to overexploitation or must be saved solely through privatisation or central state control (Ostrom, 1990). Through extensive empirical studies, she shows that communities frequently develop effective systems of self-regulation, monitoring, and sanctioning that prevent collapse and enable long-term stewardship.

Ostrom's findings suggest that the crucial question is not whether commons inevitably fail, but what institutional, social, and cultural conditions allow communities to manage them successfully. This has direct implications for the cases discussed above. For overfishing, it points towards forms of co-management in which local fishing communities play an integral role in rule-making and enforcement. In the Nigerian context, it supports approaches that empower local communities with recognised rights and responsibilities over forests, linked to viable alternative livelihoods. Even in the case of the fashion industry and air pollution, Ostrom's perspective hints at the potential for industry-wide collective action, self-regulatory regimes, and multi-level governance arrangements that internalise environmental costs and distribute responsibilities more fairly.

As the discussion moves to Ostrom's work in the next section, the contrast with Hardin becomes clearer. Hardin provides a stark warning about the potential for tragedy in commons situations but offers a limited range of solutions. Ostrom, by contrast, opens up a more hopeful and differentiated picture of how common-pool resources can be governed. The subsequent analysis will therefore use Ostrom's insights not only to assess alternative governance strategies, but also to probe broader ethical and political questions. By setting community-based approaches alongside market-led solutions, I will examine what the commons dilemma reveals about individual agency, collective responsibility, and the nature of the social bond. In doing so, the chapter prepares the way for a reoriented environmental ethic—one that places civic duty, membership, and our relationship to shared places at the centre of responses to contemporary environmental challenges.

6.5 Elinor Ostrom on *Governing the Commons*: The Power of Community Cooperation

Having outlined both the relevance and the limits of Hardin's analysis, I now turn to Elinor Ostrom's influential work on common-pool resource management. Ostrom's empirical research reveals a crucial feature often neglected in standard economic models: the capacity of communities to devise, maintain, and enforce their own systems of governance. Rather than accepting a binary choice between state control and privatisation, she documents numerous cases in which users of shared resources create institutional arrangements that sustain those resources over long periods (Ostrom, 1990).

The importance of Ostrom's work lies not merely in cataloguing successful examples of community management. By examining her case studies and theoretical reflections, it is possible to draw broader philosophical and ethical conclusions about the role of community in realising the common good without eroding individual freedoms and rights. In what follows, I engage with her analysis in order to clarify what is genuinely *tragic* about the tragedy of the commons, and to connect this clarification to earlier discussions of homo economicus, possessive individualism, and the idealisation of unrestrained economic liberty. While individual freedom remains central to human flourishing, I argue that freedom detached from civic virtue and moral responsibility is ill-suited to the challenges posed by contemporary environmental crises.

The analysis in this chapter thus serves as a bridge to the broader argument about civic virtue environmentalism and the recovery of citizenship in environmental governance. Ostrom's account of successful community management of common-pool resources provides empirical support for reimagining environmental stewardship as rooted in civic virtue and membership in communities—an argument developed more systematically in the subsequent chapters.

6.5.1 Common-Pool Resource Management: From Game Theory to Real-World Complexities

In *Governing the Commons*, Ostrom (1990) critically examines three theoretical frameworks that have shaped policy debates on common-pool resource governance: the tragedy of the commons, the prisoner's dilemma, and the logic of collective action. While Hardin's article gave the tragedy of the commons its canonical form in the late twentieth century, Ostrom traces the underlying idea back to Aristotle's remark that what is held in common tends to receive less individual care than private property.²²⁵ She also notes affinities between Hardin's account and Hobbes's description of the state of nature, in which unregulated pursuit of self-interest undermines collective welfare.

Ostrom then links these ideas to game-theoretic and public-choice models. She argues that the tragedy of the commons, the prisoner's dilemma, and Mancur Olson's account of collective action all converge on a single structural issue: the free-rider problem.

The tragedy of the commons, the prisoner's dilemma, and the logic of collective action are closely related concepts in the models that have defined the accepted way of viewing many problems that individuals face when attempting to achieve collective benefits. At the heart of each of these models is the free-rider problem. Whenever one person cannot be excluded from the benefits that others provide, each person is motivated not to contribute to the joint effort, but to free-ride on the efforts of others.²²⁶

Ostrom discusses the prisoner's dilemma using Hardin's metaphor of common grazing lands. Two herders confront choices about how intensively to graze. In game-theoretic terms, each can either cooperate (limit grazing to sustainable levels) or defect (maximise individual gain). Mutual cooperation yields moderate benefits for both; mutual defection leads to degradation and

²²⁵ Αριστοτέλης, *Πολιτικά*, Βιβλίο ΙΙ, κεφάλαιο 3

²²⁶ Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge University Press.p.6

loss; unilateral defection gives the defector a short-term advantage while harming the co-operative party. The structure of payoffs makes defection the individually rational strategy, even though it produces a collectively worse outcome.

She notes that the prisoner's dilemma has generated an extensive literature—thousands of papers by the mid-1970s—because it captures a fundamental tension between individual rationality and collective welfare. Yet she also argues that the model's assumptions of non-cooperation and the impossibility of binding agreements may oversimplify real-world resource contexts. In practice, resource users can often communicate, negotiate, and craft rules, and are not always confined to one-shot or strictly non-cooperative interactions.²²⁷

Ostrom's discussion of Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) similarly recognises both the power and the limits of this framework. Olson argues that in large groups, individuals have weak incentives to contribute to public goods, since non-contributors enjoy the same benefits as contributors. Without selective incentives or coercive mechanisms, rational actors are thus inclined to free-ride, with the result that public goods are underprovided.

Indeed, unless the number of individuals is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests.²²⁸

Ostrom notes that Olson's work marked a significant departure from more optimistic group theories by challenging the assumption that group interests naturally translate into individual action.²²⁹ However, she also suggests that many later readings of Olson exaggerate the pessimistic

²²⁷ Ostrom, E., p.7

²²⁸ Olson, M. (1965). *The Logic of Collective Action. Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.p.2

²²⁹ Ostrom, E. ,p.5

implications of his argument. Olson himself left the prospects for intermediate-sized groups more open than many of his interpreters acknowledged.²³⁰

This is important for Ostrom, because her own empirical research shows that group size and excludability are only part of the story. Institutional arrangements, social norms, shared understandings, and patterns of communication are often equally decisive in determining whether collective action succeeds. Her reinterpretation of these models thus opens the way for a more nuanced account in which the conditions for overcoming free-rider problems can be studied empirically, rather than assumed to be absent.

6.5.2 The Use and Limits of Theoretical Models in Environmental Governance

Ostrom's discussion of the tragedy of the commons, the prisoner's dilemma, and the logic of collective action yields a double lesson. On the one hand, these models provide valuable tools for understanding how individually rational behaviour can lead to collectively irrational outcomes, especially in the provision and maintenance of public goods. On the other hand, she cautions against treating the constraints built into these models as fixed features of empirical reality. Her criticism is particularly clear in her comments on the prisoner's dilemma analogy:

The prisoners in the famous dilemma cannot change the constraints imposed on them by the district attorney; they are in jail. Not all users of natural resources are similarly incapable of changing their constraints. As long as individuals are viewed as prisoners, policy prescriptions will address this metaphor. I would rather address the question of how to enhance the capabilities of those involved to change the constraining rules of the game to lead to outcomes other than remorseless tragedies.²³¹

²³⁰ Ostrom, E., p.6

²³¹ Ostrom, E., p.7

The danger, for Ostrom, is that when policymakers treat resource users as if they were prisoners trapped in fixed structures, they naturally gravitate towards external, top-down solutions—whether privatisation or central state regulation. This risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it neglects the potential of users to organise, to change rules, and to develop their own governance arrangements.

Ostrom thus argues for a shift in perspective: rather than assuming *remorseless tragedies*, we should ask how the capacities of those involved can be enhanced so that they can alter the *rules of the game* themselves. In place of universal, one-size-fits-all prescriptions, she advocates a polycentric approach: multiple, overlapping centres of authority operating at local, regional, national, and sometimes international levels. In such systems, communities, associations, and public agencies can experiment, learn, and adapt institutions to local conditions.

This approach foregrounds the agency of resource users. It recognises that common-pool resource management typically involves dense social interactions, place-specific ecological knowledge, and evolving norms of trust, reciprocity, and sanctioning. Such complexity is largely abstracted away in stylised game-theoretic models.

Nevertheless, many scholars continue to defend the value of these models for environmental policy. Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation* (1984) offers a well-known example. Through studies of the iterated prisoner's dilemma, Axelrod shows how co-operation can emerge and stabilise among self-interested actors when interactions are repeated and strategies such as reciprocity and conditional cooperation are available. Although his work is not focused specifically on environmental governance, it has clear implications for understanding how co-operative norms might develop among resource users and how institutional design might reinforce them.²³²

²³² Axelrod, R. (1984). *The Evolution of Cooperation*. Basic Books

Similarly, James Acheson and Roy Gardner's (2011) study of the Maine lobster fishery—*The Evolution of the Maine Lobster V-Notch Practice: Cooperation in a Prisoner's Dilemma Game*—demonstrates how game theory can illuminate real-world resource management. The voluntary *V-notch* practice, in which lobstermen mark and return breeding females, involves a clear tension between short-term gain and long-term sustainability. The prisoner's dilemma framework helps to clarify this tension and to identify the role of social norms, peer monitoring, and regulatory backing in sustaining co-operative behaviour over time.²³³

In a more formal economic vein, Partha Dasgupta and Geoffrey Heal, in *Economic Theory and Exhaustible Resources* (1979), argue that such models capture the central incentive problems facing users of finite resources. Their view is that game theory can help to diagnose where private incentives diverge from collective, long-term interests, and thereby guide the design of institutions and policies that better align the two.²³⁴

These insights have been extended to global environmental challenges. Robert Keohane and David Victor (2016) apply collective-action and game-theoretic frameworks to climate change negotiations, arguing that they illuminate the strategic structure of international bargaining and help explain both recurrent failures and partial successes.²³⁵ Scott Barrett (2003) similarly contends that environmental treaties often succeed when they succeed in reshaping incentives—for example, through enforcement mechanisms, side-payments, or club-like benefits.²³⁶ Robert Wade (1987) emphasises that, while real-world resource management is more complex than any model, the basic incentive problems identified by these frameworks must be addressed by any viable governance regime. From this perspective, the very parsimony of game-theoretic models is what

²³³ Acheson, J., & Gardner, R. (2011). The Evolution of the Maine Lobster V-Notch Practice: Cooperation in a Prisoner's Dilemma Game. *Ecology and Society*, 16(1)

²³⁴ Dasgupta, P., & Heal, G. (1979). *Economic Theory and Exhaustible Resources*. Cambridge University Press.

²³⁵ Keohane, R. O., & Victor, D. G. (2016). Cooperation and discord in global climate policy. *Nature Climate Change*, 6(6), 570–575.

²³⁶ Barrett, S., (2003). *Environment and Statecraft*. Oxford University Press.

makes them useful: they strip away detail in order to highlight core coordination and incentive problems that policy must confront.²³⁷

Even so, these arguments do not fully capture the heart of Ostrom's approach. Her concern is less to deny the diagnostic value of such models than to insist that they are incomplete. They do not, on their own, explain why some communities succeed in governing commons while others fail, nor do they illuminate the institutional creativity and moral resources that communities can deploy. Her work demonstrates that crucial variables—context, multi-level institutional structures, shared norms, local knowledge, and the cultivation of trust—are not adequately represented in simplified frameworks.

Ostrom's research thus provides empirical backing for the moral and philosophical position developed in this thesis: that effective environmental governance depends on civic responsibility, community-based stewardship, and a richer understanding of agency than that embodied in *homo economicus*. By downplaying or ignoring these community-level dynamics, purely game-theoretic accounts risk obscuring precisely those practices of membership, loyalty, and virtue that make sustainable common-pool resource management possible—and which will, in later chapters, form the foundations of civic virtue environmentalism.

6.5.3 Beyond the State–Market Dichotomy: Ostrom's Critique of Traditional Solutions to Commons Management

As discussed in the previous section, Ostrom argues that effective solutions to collective action problems often arise not from external imposition but from the capacity of those affected to negotiate, establish, and revise their own rules. This has significant implications for policy: rather than imposing uniform designs from above, governance should aim to facilitate local institutional

²³⁷ Wade, R. (1987). The management of common property resources: Collective action as an alternative to privatisation or state regulation. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 11(2), 95–106.

innovation and enable resource users to craft context-sensitive arrangements. To make this case, Ostrom systematically challenges the two dominant prescriptions that have shaped debates on the commons: the *Leviathan* model of centralised state control and the market solution of privatisation.

On the statist side, William Ophuls (1973) contends that environmental problems “cannot be solved through cooperation” and therefore require a powerful state endowed with “major coercive powers”.²³⁸ Hardin similarly maintains that “if ruin is to be avoided in a crowded world, people must be responsive to a coercive force outside their individual psyches, a ‘Leviathan’, to use Hobbes’s term”.²³⁹ On this view, a central authority must determine who may use a resource, in what quantity, and under what conditions, enforcing its decrees through sanctions.

Ostrom challenges this model by exposing both its practical and its conceptual weaknesses. In modified game-theoretic formulations, she shows that Leviathan-type solutions presuppose highly idealised conditions: perfect information about the resource and its users, costless monitoring, and reliable sanctioning. These assumptions rarely hold. Central authorities are prone to errors of information and judgment and may misidentify unsustainable practices or penalise behaviour that is, in fact, consistent with local ecological knowledge. The costs of constructing and maintaining a centralised apparatus—legal, bureaucratic, and monitoring infrastructures—are frequently underestimated and can exceed the benefits it is intended to secure. In such circumstances, the attempt to impose comprehensive control can generate new inefficiencies or aggravate the very problems it was meant to resolve. Her critique also targets the anthropology implicit in the Leviathan model. By treating resource users as fundamentally incapable of self-organisation, this perspective casts them as passive subjects requiring external discipline. Ostrom regards this as both empirically inaccurate and normatively problematic: it ignores a substantial

²³⁸ Ophuls, W. (1973). *Leviathan or Oblivion*. In *Toward a Steady State Economy*, ed. H. E. Daly, (pp. 215-30). Freeman, p.228

²³⁹ Hardin, G. (1978). *Political Requirements for Preserving our Common Heritage*. In *Wildlife and America*, ed. H. P. Bokaw, pp. 310-17. Council on Environmental Quality. p.314

body of evidence showing that local communities do, in fact, develop durable institutions for governing shared resources, and it discounts the political and moral significance of that capacity.²⁴⁰

The privatisation solution, although consonant with free-market principles, fares no better under detailed scrutiny. Proponents such as Robert Smith (1981) argue that private property rights are “the only way to avoid the tragedy of the commons”, on the assumption that individual ownership aligns incentives by making owners directly responsible for both the benefits and the costs of resource use. On this view, partitioning a common resource into privately owned parcels eliminates free-riding by tying outcomes to individual decisions.²⁴¹

Ostrom’s analysis reveals several difficulties with this approach. First, it presumes that resources can straightforwardly be parcelled out and that ecological conditions are sufficiently homogeneous and predictable to make such partitioning workable. In many cases this is unrealistic. For grazing lands, for example, variation in rainfall and soil quality means that productivity fluctuates unpredictably across parcels. Rigid boundaries can lead to overuse of temporarily productive plots and underuse of others, impeding adaptive risk-sharing practices and increasing ecological vulnerability.

Second, privatisation carries significant transaction and enforcement costs: surveying and demarcating boundaries, installing fences or other exclusion mechanisms, monitoring compliance, and resolving disputes. In many settings—particularly where institutional capacity is weak—these costs are prohibitive.

More fundamentally, Ostrom notes that even after formal privatisation, many resource systems remain functionally shared. Fisheries, groundwater basins, and irrigation networks, for example, cannot be fully reduced to discrete, independent units. In such systems, the mere

²⁴⁰ Ostrom, E., pp. 8-11

²⁴¹ Smith, R. J. (1981). Resolving the Tragedy of the Commons by Creating Private Property Rights in *Wildlife*. *CATO Journal* 1:439-68. p.467

assignment of private rights does not remove the need for collective governance arrangements. The assumption that privatisation by itself resolves collective action problems is therefore unwarranted.

Empirical studies of specific privatisation schemes reinforce these concerns. Individual transferable quota (ITQ) systems in fisheries are often cited as paradigmatic market-based solutions to the commons. Yet Carl Walters and John Parslow (2010) argue that ITQs have frequently failed to secure sustainability, since profit-seeking can encourage practices such as quota-busting and high-grading, which undermine stock conservation.²⁴² Parzival Copes and Anthony Charles (2004) similarly show that ITQs tend to concentrate access in the hands of larger operators, marginalising small-scale fishers and intensifying socio-economic inequalities within coastal communities. These systems thus risk reproducing, in a new form, many of the distributive and ecological tensions characteristic of common-pool resource dilemmas.²⁴³

The Cochabamba water case in Bolivia offers an even starker illustration of the social and ethical limits of commodifying essential resources. The privatisation of the city's water system under a concession to the Bechtel Corporation led to steep price increases, rendering water unaffordable for many low-income residents. Here, the logic of treating an indispensable good as a commodity came into direct conflict with basic needs and sparked widespread protest. The episode makes visible the moral tensions that arise when common-pool resources central to human survival are subjected to strict market logics.²⁴⁴

Taken together, these examples underscore the limitations of both centralised state control and straightforward privatisation as general solutions to the governance of the commons. By framing resources primarily as objects of command or commodities, these approaches risk

²⁴² Walters, C., & Parslow, J. (2010). Individual transferable quotas and the "tragedy of the commons." *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences*, 67(11), 1889-1896. <https://doi.org/10.1139/F10-104>

²⁴³ Copes P, Charles A. (2004). Socioeconomics of Individual Transferable Quotas and Community-Based Fishery Management. *Agricultural and Resource Economics Review*, 33(2):171-181.

²⁴⁴ Finnegan, W. (2002). Leasing the rain. *The New Yorker*, 8(4), 43-48.

displacing adaptive, locally developed practices and overlooking the knowledge, norms, and relationships that sustain them. Ostrom's work reorients the debate by insisting that governance models must be sensitive to context and that they should enable, rather than displace, community-based institutional creativity.²⁴⁵

6.5.4 Ostrom's Alternative: A Polycentric and Empirical Approach

Against the state-market dichotomy, Ostrom articulates a distinctive framework for common-pool resource governance grounded in polycentricity and self-organisation. Rather than locating authority in a single centre—whether a state agency or a private owner—polycentric governance involves multiple, overlapping centres of decision-making operating at different scales. Within this framework, resource users are understood not primarily as potential defectors but as agents capable of learning, negotiating, and crafting institutions.

Ostrom argues that, when afforded sufficient autonomy, resource users can design and maintain sophisticated governance arrangements that are neither imposed by central authorities nor reducible to individual property rights. These arrangements emerge through iterative processes of negotiation, experimentation, and revision. Communication, trust-building, and the development of shared norms play a central role in sustaining them. In such contexts, users are not inevitably trapped in tragedies of the commons; they may, under the right conditions, transform the structure of interaction itself.

To illustrate this, she develops what she calls a "fifth game", extending the standard repertoire of prisoner's dilemma-type scenarios.

²⁴⁵Ostrom, E. (2000). Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 14(3), 137–158.

To open up the discussion of institutional options for solving commons dilemmas, I want now to present a fifth game in which the herders themselves can make a binding contract to commit themselves to a cooperative strategy that they themselves will work out.²⁴⁶

In this model, the herders, drawing on their detailed knowledge of local conditions, design their own contractual rules, specify obligations, and agree on sanctions.

The key difference between Game 5 and Games 2 and 3 is that the participants themselves design their own contracts in Game 5 in light of the information they have at hand. The herders, who use the same meadow year after year, have detailed and relatively accurate information about carrying capacity. They observe the behavior of other herders and have an incentive to report contractual infractions. Arbitrators may not need to hire monitors to observe the activities of the contracting parties. The self-interest of those who negotiated the contract will lead them to monitor each other and to report observed infractions so that the contract is enforced. A regulatory agency, on the other hand, always needs to hire its own monitors. The regulatory agency then faces the principal-agent problem of how to ensure that its monitors do their own job.²⁴⁷

Here, enforcement is internal rather than external: because participants have a direct stake in the robustness of the agreement, they monitor one another and report violations. This stands in contrast to regulatory structures, where distant agencies must create and supervise monitoring systems and then confront principal-agent problems in ensuring their effectiveness.

Ostrom supports this theoretical construct with detailed empirical studies. The inshore fishery at Alanya in Turkey is a canonical example. Local fishers there devised a system of

²⁴⁶ Ostrom, E., p.15

²⁴⁷ Ostrom, E., p.17

rotational access to fishing sites, allocated through a lottery, which reduced conflict, prevented localised overfishing, and promoted a fair distribution of opportunities.

Alanya provides an example of a self-governed common-property arrangement in which the rules have been devised and modified by the participants themselves and also are monitored and enforced by them.²⁴⁸

The Alanya case illustrates several key features of Ostrom's approach: rules are tailored to ecological and social conditions; they are subject to revision; and they are backed by shared understandings and social sanctions, rather than relying exclusively on formal legal enforcement.

From a comparative analysis of many such cases, Ostrom distils a set of design principles characteristic of long-enduring common-pool resource institutions. These include clearly defined boundaries; congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions; collective-choice arrangements that allow most users to participate in modifying operational rules; effective monitoring; graduated sanctions for rule violators; low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms; recognition of the right of users to organise; and, where appropriate, nested enterprises, with governance activities organised in multiple layers. These principles are not a blueprint, but they identify structural features that tend to support durability and adaptability.²⁴⁹

What marks Ostrom's framework as distinctive is her view of resource users as active problem-solvers rather than as passive recipients of regulations or as purely self-interested maximisers. She focuses on enabling conditions—communication, trust, autonomy, and recognition—rather than prescribing a single institutional form. Her account challenges both statist paternalism and market reductionism, showing that institutional diversity and experimentation are often indispensable in addressing complex environmental challenges.

²⁴⁸ Ostrom, E., p.20

²⁴⁹ Ostrom, E., pp. 91-95

Most significantly for the argument of this thesis, Ostrom's empirical and theoretical work constitutes a challenge to Hobbesian and narrowly economic conceptions of human agency. Her findings suggest that individuals are capable not only of strategic calculation but also of prudential judgment, co-operation, and moral reasoning that extend beyond immediate self-interest. In doing so, her research supports a richer conception of agency—one in which virtues such as practical wisdom, a sense of fairness, and concern for the common good can be activated and sustained within appropriate institutional contexts. This conception underpins the account of civic responsibility and civic virtue environmentalism that the subsequent chapters develop.

6.6 What Is Truly Tragic about the Tragedy of the Commons

The tragedy of the commons is not merely an economic or ecological failure; at its core, it is a moral tragedy. What is truly tragic is not only the depletion of resources but what this reveals about our conception of human agency and our understanding of social and civic bonds. The tragedy exposes a decline in *civic responsibility* and a weakening sense of belonging and membership in shared communities. It shows how unchecked individualism, nurtured by liberal and economic frameworks, severs individuals from an appreciation of their genuine interests, their embeddedness in the social whole, and the *prudence* required to act responsibly in light of that embeddedness.

Hardin's framing of the commons problem presupposes a fundamentally self-interested and short-sighted individual. In doing so, it presents a starkly pessimistic anthropology: individuals are portrayed as incapable of restraining their immediate impulses for the sake of long-term collective goods. This image exemplifies what I identify as the moral impoverishment of *homo economicus*—the *economic man* produced by liberalism's fixation on self-interest and economic freedom. Economic man is not only ignorant of the wider costs of his actions, but also morally truncated: he lacks the prudence and foresight needed to perceive the interdependence of personal and communal flourishing.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's (2005) essay *It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligation* offers a particularly telling illustration of this impoverished moral outlook. He argues that individual actions such as "joyguzzling"—driving a high-emission car for pleasure—generate no direct moral obligation, because each act contributes only negligibly to global warming. This position, shaped by a liberal individualist framework, takes as its starting point a self-interested actor whose responsibilities are largely confined to direct, traceable harms. In doing so, it reproduces the very fragmentation and detachment that underpin the tragedy of the commons. On Sinnott-Armstrong's account, moral responsibility is reduced to a harm-contribution principle: one is required to refrain from an action only if it can be shown to cause, by itself, a morally significant harm. This narrow understanding sidelines questions of moral character and civic responsibility. It reflects a depleted moral vocabulary in which obligations are recognised only where there is clear causal attribution, leaving little room for the virtues or for duties arising from one's membership in a community and one's participation in shared practices.²⁵⁰

As discussed in Chapter 1, guilt-based appeals often fail to motivate meaningful environmental engagement. Survey data show that many individuals profess concern about environmental degradation, but their actions remain limited to low-cost, largely symbolic gestures—recycling, occasional *green* purchases, or the adoption of electric vehicles—undertaken as much to relieve guilt as to confront the structural dimensions of environmental harm. This pattern suggests that, within the orbit of *homo economicus*, environmental responsibility is frequently experienced as a burden to be minimised rather than as an expression of civic character or shared purpose. Guilt without a substantive conception of virtue and belonging produces shallow, unstable forms of engagement.

²⁵⁰ Sinnott-Armstrong, W., & Howarth, R. B. (Eds.). (2005). *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics* (Vol. 5). Emerald Group Publishing Limited

In a later response to critics, Sinnott-Armstrong and Ewan Kingston (2018) explicitly reject the idea that the cultivation of *green virtues* can ground moral requirements. Referring to environmental virtue ethicists such as Dale Jamieson and Lori Gruen Hourdequin, they write:

Some critics argue that we need to cultivate ‘green virtues’ in order to fully understand our responsibilities regarding climate change. For instance, Dale Jamieson argues that preserving the virtue of humility, creating a virtue of mindfulness, and rehabilitating the virtue of temperance are all important tasks for us in the Anthropocene... Hourdequin (2010) adds that green activists, in particular, may express more integrity and less hypocrisy if they choose not to joyguzzle... Our response is simple: virtues are not moral requirements... Joyguzzling can fail to be virtuous or good—indeed, it can even be vicious and bad—without violating any moral requirement.²⁵¹

On this view, virtues such as humility, mindfulness, temperance, integrity, or respect for nature may be admirable, but failing to embody them does not entail blameworthiness or warrant sanctions. Virtue is recast as optional excellence rather than as a condition of responsible agency.²⁵²

My argument takes a different route. I do not treat virtues as merely desirable ideals standing outside the space of duty; rather, I contend that certain virtues—above all prudence—are integral to civic responsibility and to any functioning environmental ethic. In collective action contexts, the absence of prudence is not a harmless omission but a substantive contributor to harm. To insist that joyguzzling or analogous actions are merely *non-ideal* but not morally wrong is, in effect, to ignore the cumulative consequences of imprudent behaviour when multiplied across populations. In this sense, prudence cannot be detached from moral requirements: where the

²⁵¹ Kingston, E., & Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2018). What’s Wrong with Joyguzzling? *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 21(1), 169–186. p.170

²⁵² For more on the “Green Virtues” see: Jamieson, D. (2014). *Reason in a dark time: Why the struggle against climate change failed--and what it means for our future*. Oxford University Press.

systematic failure to exercise prudence predictably produces serious harms, the cultivation (and exercise) of prudence becomes a condition of fulfilling one's responsibilities.

By contrast with Sinnott-Armstrong and Kingston, I suggest that the central moral question should not be restricted to whether a single joyride causes measurable harm. Rather, it should concern the formation of character and the capacities needed to transcend the self-enclosed standpoint of the *joyrider*. Here Ostrom's critique of the prisoner's dilemma is instructive. Her work shows that individuals are not fixed in a state of narrow self-interest, but can, under appropriate institutional and social conditions, develop the capacities required for co-operation and long-term stewardship. The question thus becomes: how can practices, institutions, and forms of membership cultivate individuals and communities capable of moving beyond the thin moral horizon of *homo economicus*?

This broader framing reorients environmental ethics away from the calculus of isolated harms and towards a richer understanding of moral responsibility that places the individual within networks of relationship, memory, and mutual dependence. It is precisely at this point that Roger Scruton's concept of *oikophilia* becomes relevant. In *How to Think Seriously About the Planet* (2014), Scruton emphasises attachment to one's "home"—understood not simply as a dwelling but as a shared place, with its history, landscape, and institutions—as a crucial motive for environmental care. *Oikophilia*, properly understood, is not a romantic sentiment but a disposition to take responsibility for one's environment because it forms part of one's extended self and the common life one shares with others.²⁵³

Oikophilia on its own cannot solve the tragedy of the commons or halt environmental degradation. Yet, when combined with prudence and a sense of civic responsibility, it provides an affective and motivational basis for the kind of long-term, community-oriented environmental

²⁵³ Scruton R. (2012). *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously About the Planet*. Atlantic.

concern that the framework of *homo economicus* lacks. It rearticulates self-interest in terms of solidarity with one's community and care for the places that sustain one's life and identity.

On this reading, the tragedy of the commons is not an inexorable outcome of *human nature* but a manifestation of the moral failures embedded in liberal individualism and its thin conception of the self. If agents are habituated to see themselves as isolated bearers of rights and preferences rather than as members of overlapping communities of obligation, then commons tragedies are likely to materialise. Conversely, by embracing a more communitarian framework—rooted in the cultivation of civic virtues and a reimagining of the self as socially and territorially embedded—we can begin to move beyond the narrow premises of guilt, minimal duty, and harm calculation towards a more substantive vision of environmental responsibility: a *civic virtue environmentalism*.

This sets the stage for the final section of this chapter, where Ostrom's emphasis on capability enhancement and institutional self-governance is brought into dialogue with an account of virtue and moral development, in order to sketch how such a civic virtue environmentalism might be made possible.

6.7 Transcending Tragedy: Virtue and Capability in Commons Management

Ostrom's critique of the prisoner's dilemma metaphor challenges not only particular policy prescriptions but also the way we conceptualise human agency in social dilemmas. When she remarks that "not all users of natural resources are similarly incapable of changing their constraints", she punctures the assumption that individuals are structurally condemned to non-cooperative outcomes. Unlike the literal prisoners in the canonical game, resource users are not wholly confined by external authorities; they often possess the capacity to alter *the rules of the game* through communication, negotiation, and institutional innovation.

This insight is central to my argument. It presents the tragedy of the commons not as an unavoidable fate but as a contingent outcome, dependent on the quality of institutions and the

capabilities of the agents who inhabit them. For Ostrom, the crucial question is how to enhance the capabilities of those involved so that they can reconfigure constraints and generate co-operative solutions. This is where her work intersects most productively with virtue ethics and with the account of civic responsibility developed in this thesis.

Ostrom's emphasis on enhancing capabilities is typically read in institutional and organisational terms: as a call to design procedures, forums, and rules that enable users to deliberate, monitor, and sanction effectively. However, there is also a moral and psychological dimension. The very ability to enter into collective agreements, to abide by them over time, and to revise them in light of experience presupposes certain dispositions: willingness to listen, readiness to compromise, concern for fairness, and a capacity to take a longer-term view of one's interests. Her rejection of *remorseless tragedies* resonates with the Aristotelian claim that character can be shaped through habituation, education, and reflection. Institutions, in this light, are not neutral containers but contexts within which virtues can be cultivated or eroded.

Where Hardin's analysis tends to fix human nature at the level of strategic, short-term maximisation, Ostrom's empirical work suggests that human agents can be otherwise. Communities in her case studies are not static collections of narrowly rational individuals; they are evolving associations in which capacities for judgement, trust, and mutual accountability are developed over time. This dynamic picture of communities aligns with the view, defended in this thesis, that individuals can acquire virtues that enhance their ability to participate in collective governance and to perceive their own good as bound up with the good of others.

The notion of "changing the rules of the game" thus has a dual significance. Institutionally, it refers to the modification of formal and informal rules that structure behaviour. Ethically, it points to the transformation of the agents who operate within those rules. As individuals learn to exercise prudence, to deliberate about long-term consequences, and to recognise the claims of others, they become capable of sustaining more demanding forms of co-operation. In this sense,

the cultivation of virtues such as *phronēsis* is itself a form of capability enhancement, indispensable for addressing commons dilemmas and environmental challenges.

Ostrom's findings challenge not only Hobbesian pessimism but also utilitarian and liberal models that reduce motivation to preference satisfaction. Her case studies reveal patterns of behaviour that cannot be fully explained in terms of immediate payoffs: resource users often accept short-term costs for the sake of preserving the resource, comply with collectively agreed rules even when defection would go unpunished, and enforce norms that express shared understandings of fairness. Such practices anticipate a thicker moral vocabulary—one that civic virtue theory can supply.

This provides a bridge to the account of *phronēsis* that I develop in the final chapter of the thesis. Drawing on Aristotelian ethics, I argue that *phronēsis* —practical wisdom or prudence—marks a deeper understanding of self-interest, in which personal flourishing is inseparable from the well-being of one's community and environment. Understood in this way, civic engagement is not a heroic sacrifice of self-interest to an abstract "common good", but a clearer recognition of one's true interests as a member of a shared whole. Caring for one's "home", in Scruton's sense of *oikophilia*, becomes a natural expression of this insight: it aligns individual and collective welfare by rooting environmental concern in the places and relationships that constitute one's life.²⁵⁴

Seen through the lens of *phronēsis*, environmental stewardship ceases to be merely a burdensome obligation imposed from without. It becomes a rational, indeed necessary, strategy for securing both personal and communal resilience over time. Recognising that one's own long-

²⁵⁴ *Phronēsis* in Greek "φρόνησις" and, "φρόνιμος-ον", (Latin *prudentia*), is interpreted as "practical wisdom". See Aristotle, & Reeve, C. D. C. (2014). *Nicomachean ethics*. Hackett Publishing Co., Inc.

Aristotle defines *phronēsis* as «λείπεται ἄρα αὐτὴν εἶναι ἕξιν ἀληθῆ μετὰ λόγου πρακτικὴν περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπων ἀγαθὰ καὶ κακά. » In *Nicomachean Ethics* (1140b 4-6), Aristotle discusses *phronēsis* and its role as practical wisdom that guides ethical actions and decisions. It emphasises how *phronēsis* integrates rational deliberation with moral virtue to achieve *eudaimonia* (flourishing). Distinct from theoretical knowledge, *phronēsis* applies to practical life, focusing on balancing individual and collective well-being. Aristotle's view is that *phronēsis* is essential for virtuous leadership and communal harmony, aligning prudence with interdependence in ethical living. The virtue of *phronēsis* will be developed and analysed in detail in the subsequent chapters, as it holds central importance to my thesis' argument.

term flourishing depends upon the health of one's natural and social environment transforms environmental action into both a moral imperative and an exercise of enlightened self-interest.

The framework I propose, then, brings Ostrom's empirical account of capability-enhancing institutions into dialogue with an Aristotelian theory of *phronēsis* and Scruton's account of *oikophilia*. Together, they supply the conceptual resources for a form of *civic virtue environmentalism* in which commons management is not simply a technical problem of regulation and incentives, but an arena for the exercise and cultivation of civic virtues. The subsequent chapters develop this framework explicitly, examining how *phronēsis* and *oikophilia* might inform a richer conception of environmental citizenship and a more ethically robust alternative to the economic man.

Chapter 7

Liberal Individualism and Its Limitations When Confronting Environmental Challenges

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I showed how rational individual choices, primarily motivated by self-interest, often fail to address collective environmental challenges effectively. In this chapter I extend this critique by examining how the liberal conception of the self deeply limits the capabilities of individuals to develop the civic responsibilities necessary for meaningful environmental engagement and action. My discussion exposes these limitations of liberal individualism in addressing environmental challenges, by examining the relationship between individual responsibility, territory and community life.

Contemporary environmental challenges present a fundamental paradox in liberal democratic societies, one that manifests in several distinct ways. First, there is the assumption that rational individuals can make informed decisions that lead to rational outcomes. However, as demonstrated in the previous chapter through game theory models such as the “prisoner’s dilemma”, rational decisions do not necessarily lead to optimal outcomes, particularly regarding environmental and natural resource management. In free-market liberal societies, the autonomous rational individual’s decisions may therefore jeopardise the freedoms of others who are affected by market-driven and profit-orientated management of natural resources and the broader environment.

A second manifestation lies in a temporal contradiction that is particularly acute within the possessive individualist and neoliberal expressions of liberalism examined in the preceding chapters. These frameworks, in their prioritisation of individual rights and economic freedom over substantive conceptions of the common good, tend to orient agency around self-interest and short-term individual preference. It is worth acknowledging that some liberal thinkers — Kymlicka, for

instance — argue that liberalism contains resources for recognising cultural and community membership precisely because such membership enables individual autonomy and choice. Yet this concession remains within the terms of a voluntary, instrumental understanding of belonging, and the critique here is directed at the dominant possessive individualist strand which, as Macpherson showed, conceives individuals primarily as proprietors of themselves and their capacities.

Within this framework, the individualistic conception of the self neglects the crucial role of community membership in maintaining continuity between past, present, and future generations. While environmental challenges demand consideration of multi-generational impacts, these frameworks struggle to foster such long-term thinking because they tend to marginalise the importance of belonging, tradition, and customs — precisely those elements that can cultivate the civic responsibilities necessary to address environmental problems.

The environmental crisis, as established in the previous chapter, reveals not merely technical or policy challenges but a deeper philosophical problem concerning how we conceive of individual moral agency and responsibility. This theoretical challenge requires to examine foundational critiques of liberal individualism and its limitations in addressing collective environmental problems.

Alasdair MacIntyre's (1981) critique of modernity provides a good point for understanding this underlying problem in liberalism's conception of the self. He argues that the liberal conception of the self as an independent author of one's life creates only a fractured individual, detached from the roles that give self-accountability and intelligibility. While the Rawlsian liberal conception of the unencumbered self prioritises rights over the common good to guarantee justice as fairness, it simultaneously removes the accountability and intelligibility of the self by isolating it from the narratives in which it participates through the journey of life.²⁵⁵ This journey, MacIntyre argues,

²⁵⁵ For the Rawlsian conception of the self, see Chapter 2 of this thesis

requires at least some conception of the good—a *telos*—which enables individuals to extend their understanding of virtues and provides context to unify the narrative of human life.²⁵⁶

Building on this critique, Michael Sandel (1982) argues that the self cannot be conceived as complete if detached from the moral force of loyalties, solidarity, and convictions that we develop through our membership in families, communities, and the broader world. His argument for civic virtue in a healthy democracy, which invites moral questions about the good life into the public sphere, provides a crucial framework for understanding personal responsibility in environmental challenges. Through this lens, we can see how individuals in modern democratic societies are not only entitled to rights but also have duties towards their communities. I argue that these duties extend to the natural surroundings of one's community, as the communitarian understanding of membership differs fundamentally from the liberal conception. While liberalism frames membership in terms of voluntary association and cooperation that leads to mutual benefit, the communitarian perspective grounds it in territorial belonging and lived locality. This territorial dimension of communitarian thought inherently extends ethical consideration to the natural surroundings that constitute a community's physical context.²⁵⁷ MacIntyre's view of community as limited to the family, the tribe and the neighbourhood rather than the state or the nation or one's social class, further reinforces this connection to locality and place.²⁵⁸

Charles Taylor's (1989) analysis of the *atomised self* further demonstrates how liberal frameworks fail to account for the essential social embeddedness of human agency and moral development. He critiques the liberal conception of community membership as fundamentally artificial due to its grounding in social contract theory. Under the liberal framework, community

²⁵⁶ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed.). Bloomsbury. (Original work published in 1981)

²⁵⁷ I explore this idea in detail in the next chapter, where I engage with Roger Scruton's concept of *oikophilia*, the love of home

²⁵⁸ MacIntyre argues that large membership structures such as the state, lack a shared understanding of the content of values, therefore they exhibit a confusion in values which is not what he has in mind when discussing forms of communities. See Avineri, S., & de-Shalit, A. (Eds.). (1992). *Communitarianism and individualism*. Oxford University Press., p.4

membership is conceptualised primarily as voluntary cooperation predicated on mutual advantage—a paradigm that closely parallels market-based interactions. In contrast, Taylor's conception positions community as having intrinsic value, serving thus as the vessel via which intergenerational values, traditions, and customs are transmitted. This foundational role of community in cultural reproduction and value formation leads Taylor to argue that community constitutes a necessary precondition for moral autonomy, rather than merely serving as an instrumental arrangement for individual benefit.²⁵⁹

In response to these theoretical and practical challenges, this chapter develops three interconnected arguments concerning the relationship between individual agency, community, civic responsibility and environmental stewardship. First, following MacIntyre's critique of liberal moral theory, and Sandel's account of civic virtue, I argue that genuine civic responsibility emerges not from abstract contractual obligations but from the concrete practices and relationships constitutive of community life. The *situated self*, embedded within networks of social meaning and obligation, provides a more compelling foundation for understanding environmental responsibility than the unencumbered self of liberal theory.

Second, integrating Taylor's ideas about the community having intrinsic value and being the precondition for moral autonomy, I demonstrate how it serves as the essential context for developing environmental virtues. Drawing on communitarian critiques of liberalism, I argue that moral development requires more than individual rational choice—it demands participation in shared practices and traditions that shape both character and understanding. This theoretical move extends beyond critique to propose a positive account of how environmental virtues emerge from and are sustained by communal life.

²⁵⁹ Taylor, C. (1992). Atomism. In S. Avineri & A. de-Shalit (Eds.), *Communitarianism and individualism* (pp. 29–50). Oxford University Press.

This chapter proceeds through the following interconnected theoretical moves: First, I revisit the liberal-communitarian debate to establish the conceptual ground before developing a critique of liberal conceptions of the self. This critique then reveals how liberal individualism proves inadequate for addressing environmental challenges. This theoretical progression establishes the foundation for examining an account of the self—the situated self, advanced by communitarian theory—which will be analysed in the subsequent chapter. The groundwork developed here enables exploration of how civic responsibility emerges through community embeddedness and how environmental virtues develop within shared practices. This analytical trail supports the investigation and analysis of specific environmental virtues—particularly *phronēsis* and its emotional counterpart *oikophilia*—as expressions of community based moral agency capable of effectively responding to contemporary environmental challenges.

7.2 Revisiting the Liberal-Communitarian Debate

While the liberal-communitarian debate has primarily operated on a theoretical level, it nevertheless carries profound implications for how we conceptualise and address collective action problems, particularly those posed by contemporary environmental challenges. In previous chapters, I traced the philosophical foundations of liberal possessive individualism from its Hobbesian and Lockean foundations through Mill, Rawls, and Hayek culminating in the extreme individualistic position of libertarian approaches. This analysis has demonstrated how reducing individual freedom to merely economic freedom proves deeply problematic, especially when examining environmental attitudes and their consequences.

This exploration revisits the liberal-communitarian debate by providing the historical context and examining the theoretical tensions within. By investigating the critiques of three communitarian thinkers—Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor—against liberalism broadly and against Rawls’s theory of justice specifically, I critically assess the limitations of liberal individualism permeating Western political, economic, and social institutions.

Their critiques focus on the liberal conception of the self, liberalism's abstract universalism, its moral subjectivism, and its prioritisation of the right over conceptions of the good. Crucially, these theoretical distinctions are not merely abstract disagreements but produce substantively different approaches to environmental responsibility, collective action, and institutional design.

The analysis reveals how the atomistic conception of responsibility advanced by liberalism fragments environmental action into discrete, often performative gestures detached from the context of community. By drawing from the notion of *ethics of distraction*, where individualised environmental responses serve primarily as psychological validation, rather than substantive engagement, I argue that genuine environmental responsibility must be reconceptualised as inherently relational and community-embedded.²⁶⁰ This challenges the liberal economic man model that reduces environmental engagement to decontextualised individual choices. Such a reconceptualisation recognises territory and locality as crucial mediating factors through which environmental challenges are meaningfully understood and addressed.

Ultimately, this analysis lays the groundwork for subsequent sections of this chapter, where I establish how contrasting understandings of selfhood—the unencumbered self of liberalism versus the situated self of communitarianism—either constrain or enable our environmental responses, by affecting both *individual engagement* and our *collective capacity* to develop meaningful solutions to ecological challenges. Building on the *diagnostic* analysis that identifies the specific failures of liberal individualism when confronted with environmental problems I move beyond critique to articulate how communitarian frameworks can generate an alternative environmental ethic.

²⁶⁰ I introduce the term *ethics of distraction*, which can be defined as a psychological mechanism through which individuals engaged in consumerist practices attempt to resolve their environmental cognitive dissonance through performative eco-conscious consumption rather than substantive behavioural change. The concept is discussed in detail in section 7.3.1 (pp. 209-210)

7.2.1 Historical Context and Theoretical Tensions

The liberal-communitarian debate represents a fundamental contestation over the nature of the self, notions of justice, political obligation and community. Its roots can be traced back to the Enlightenment project, where classical liberalism emerged as a reaction to unchecked authoritarianism, rigid dogma and oppression by governments and institutions, advocating instead for individual autonomy and rights based on man's ability for rational choice. This philosophical trajectory found its most prominent modern articulation in Rawls's (1971) *Theory of Justice*, which proposed a procedural framework for justice based on fairness and the *original position*, prioritising individual rights over conceptions of the common good. Rawls attempted to construct a theory of justice independent of metaphysical foundations based instead on a procedural framework that supports particular conceptions of the good. His neo-Kantian project reconstructed liberalism through the methodological innovation of the *original position*, a hypothetical choice situation designed to yield principles of justice through procedural constraints rather than substantive moral commitments.²⁶¹

This resurgence of liberal thought, however, prompted a critical response from communitarian thinkers in the 1980s, who argued that liberalism's focus on the autonomous individual and rights fails to acknowledge the fundamental embeddedness of human life within communities, traditions, and shared values.

In my subsequent discussion of these communitarian critiques, I employ a synthetic approach that will ultimately allow me to identify the common ground among Sandel, MacIntyre, and Taylor, collectively exposing the theoretical tensions that emerge when liberalism attempts to articulate principles of justice independent of substantive conceptions of the good. This analysis

²⁶¹ Rawls's theory is discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of the thesis

simultaneously illuminates the implications of Rawls's responsive reframing of his theory as *political liberalism* rather than a comprehensive doctrine.

Daniel Bell (1993) identifies three main interconnected critiques —of the liberal self, liberal universalism, and liberal atomism— that operate through the distinct yet complementary approaches of Sandel, Macintyre and Taylor revealing fundamental limitations in the liberal conception of selfhood and human agency.²⁶² These critiques conceptually align with Stephen Mulhall and Andrew Swift's (1996) more systematic examination of the communitarian challenge to Rawlsian liberalism. Their analysis focuses on four claims emerging directly from the methodological constraints of Rawls's original position: his conception of personhood, liberalism's asocial individualism and universalism, the moral subjectivism or objectivism underlying liberalism's theoretical assumptions about choice and conceptions of the good, and the supposed anti-perfectionism that liberalism advocates regarding political organisation and the role of the state.²⁶³

Sandel's (1982) political critique of the liberal self directly confronts Rawls's conception of an *unencumbered* self. In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel challenges Rawls's *deontological* liberalism by questioning whether we can coherently conceive of a self prior to its ends. He argues that:

To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments such as these is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth. For to have character is to know that I move in a history I neither summon nor command which carries consequences none the less for my choices and conduct. It draws me closer to some and more distant from others· it makes some aims more appropriate, others less so. As a self-interpreting being, I am able to reflect .on my history

²⁶² Bell, D. (1993). *Communitarianism and its Critics*. Oxford University Press.

²⁶³ Mulhall, S., & Swift, A. (1996). *Liberals and Communitarians* (Second Edition). Blackwell

and in this sense to distance myself from It, but the distance is always precarious and provisional, the point of reflection never finally secured outside the history itself. A person with character thus knows that he is implicated in various ways even as he reflects, and feels the moral weight of what he knows. rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth.²⁶⁴

Further developing this critique, Sandel explains why the liberal conception of personhood is problematic by drawing on the importance of loyalties and memberships:

Certain moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize -obligations of solidarity, for example, or religious duties- may claim us for reasons unrelated to a choice. Such obligations are difficult to dismiss as merely confused, and yet difficult to account for if we understand ourselves as free and independent selves, unbound by moral ties we have not chosen.²⁶⁵

This fundamentally challenges the liberal presumption that autonomous choice precedes communal attachments and obligations, suggesting instead that involuntary social attachments fundamentally shape identity in ways that resist rational reconsideration.

MacIntyre provides the second theoretical intervention with his critique targeting liberalism's abstract universalism. In *After Virtue* (1981), he locates liberalism within modernity's broader epistemic crisis—the fragmentation of moral discourse following the abandonment of Aristotelian teleology. He exposes liberalism's lack of conceptual resources when it comes to morality and he demonstrates how rights-based discourse becomes unintelligible when severed from its social and moral context. Where liberal theorists posit rational deliberation as sufficient for normative justification, MacIntyre demonstrates how such deliberation operates within a field

²⁶⁴ Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press, p. 179

²⁶⁵ Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press, p.188

of decontextualised conceptual artifacts, severed from the traditions and practices that once rendered them intelligible.

The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, or morality.²⁶⁶

MacIntyre's metaphor of moral language as fragments lacking contexts illuminates how liberalism's rights-based framework operates with conceptual artifacts severed from their historical and social roots. What he identifies is not merely a theoretical oversight but a profound epistemic rupture: liberal rights claims function as *simulacra of morality* precisely because they attempt to universalise principles abstracted from the particular traditions and social practices that once rendered them intelligible. This critique directly challenges the *Enlightenment's Project* where moral principles can be derived through abstract rationality alone. For MacIntyre, such principles inevitably become hollow when disconnected from the teleological frameworks and shared understandings of the good that historically grounded moral reasoning. Thus, when liberalism posits universal rights as self-evident truths accessible through rational deliberation, it undermines the socially embedded nature of moral concepts. The *grave disorder* he diagnoses in moral language, reflects liberalism's failure to recognise that moral language and in consequence rights talk derive their meaning not from abstract universality but from particular social matrices, traditions, and historically situated practices.

²⁶⁶ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. pp.23-24.

Taylor's hermeneutic critique of liberal *atomism* provides the third theoretical challenge, addressing how liberalism conceptualises the *moral space* of the self.²⁶⁷ In *Sources of the Self* (1989), his excavation of modernity's sources reveals its dependence on *moral ontologies* and *constitutive* goods that liberalism's procedural neutrality officially disavows. Through his concept of the *dialogical self*, Taylor demonstrates that identity is fundamentally social:

My discovering my identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new and crucial importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others. The point is not that this dependence on others arose with the age of authenticity. A form of dependence was always there. The socially derived identity was by its very nature dependent on society. But in the earlier age recognition never arose as a problem. Social recognition was built in to the socially derived identity from the very fact that it was based on social categories everyone took for granted. The thing about inwardly derived, personal, original identity is that it doesn't enjoy this recognition a priori. It has to win it through exchange, and it can fail.²⁶⁸

According to Taylor, the shaping of identity is inherently intersubjective, which means that it depends on processes of recognition that are socially mediated. The "inwardly derived, personal, original identity", advocated by liberalism, cannot, according to Taylor "enjoy recognition a priori" but must "win it through exchange". In other words, the self cannot be conceived outside of the social processes that liberalism's atomistic framework opposes. This conception of the self as prior to its ends reveals a paradox in the heart of liberalism: on the one hand it champions individual authenticity and on the other hand it denies the social conditions

²⁶⁷ Taylor's critique of liberalism forms part of his broader critique of modern culture, where liberalism constitutes a central and defining strand

²⁶⁸ Taylor, C. (1991). *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, pp. 47-48

necessary for the realisation of individual identity. Therefore, liberal theory misinterprets not just the nature of moral reasoning, as previously argued, but also the ontological conditions of human agency itself. Taylor notes that:

This is the sense in which one cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution'.²⁶⁹

By arguing that "a self exists only within webs of interlocution", Taylor asserts the ontological impossibility of selfhood outside of socially shared contexts. This challenges the methodological individualism of Rawlsian liberalism, which requires that we conceptualise the self as capable of abstraction from its social particularity in the "original position". For Taylor, such abstraction is not merely difficult but conceptually incoherent, as selfhood itself is constituted through ongoing *dialogical* engagement with communities and traditions. His analysis demonstrates how moral agency requires frameworks of qualitative contrast irreducible to preference aggregation—frameworks inevitably embedded in historical communities. Therefore, the concept of the self that emerges from Taylor's analysis is a *situated self* within the moral space that gives meaning to identity—a direct challenge to liberalism's procedural neutrality toward conceptions of the good.

I have presented the three primary communitarian critiques of liberal individualism by revisiting the liberal-communitarian debate. These critiques establish the conceptual groundwork for my subsequent analysis in Section 3, where I will explore in greater detail how alternative conceptions of the self and community provide intellectual resources for addressing contemporary

²⁶⁹ Taylor, C. (2001). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity* (10th printing). Harvard University Press.p.36 (Original work published in 1989)

environmental challenges—challenges that liberal individualism struggles to adequately conceptualise or address.

What distinguishes these three communitarian positions is not merely the focus of their argument, but their distinctive methodological approaches to critiquing liberal individualism. Sandel's critique focuses on the civic-political critique, challenging how liberalism conceptualises citizenship and public responsibility by demonstrating how the *unencumbered* self undermines the possibility of genuine civic attachment.²⁷⁰ His analysis reveals how liberalism's procedural framework systematically excludes forms of obligation that precede choice. MacIntyre's historical-territorial approach functions genealogically, locating the epistemic rupture that separated moral concepts from their teleological contexts. By emphasising the importance of historical narratives and tradition, MacIntyre restricts authentic community to smaller-scale contexts (tribes, families, neighbourhoods) that cannot extend to the abstract universal state, suggesting thus that environmental responsibility must be grounded in concrete *territorial* attachments rather than abstract universal principles. Taylor's hermeneutic critique operates at the level of moral ontology, examining how the frameworks that give meaning to identity are socially constituted. His analysis reveals how the moral space of the self depends upon *webs of interlocution* making therefore, certain environmental goods intelligible as goods, positioning community not merely as a political association but as the generative foundation for moral agency itself. These methodological distinctions reveal how communitarianism challenges liberalism across multiple domains—civic, historical, and hermeneutic—collectively demonstrating the inadequacy of liberal theoretical frameworks.

What unites these three communitarian positions—Sandel's political critique, MacIntyre's historical account, and Taylor's hermeneutic approach—is their fundamental challenge to liberalism's atomistic conception of the individual as prior to his end. Despite operating through

²⁷⁰ Sandel, M. J. (1984). The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self. *Political Theory*, 12(1), 81–96.

different analytical frameworks, they collectively demonstrate that liberalism misconceives the relationship between self and its ends by prioritising individual choice over constitution, universalism over historical context, and rights over the common good. As Mulhall and Swift (1996) demonstrate, these critiques converge on four interconnected theoretical tensions that they identify in liberal theory and in Rawls's political liberalism: the implausibility of its conception of the person, the incoherence of its asocial individualism, the contradiction in its claims to value-neutrality, and the limitations of its anti-perfectionism regarding the state.²⁷¹

Bell (1993) also identifies how the critiques by Sandel, MacIntyre and Taylor, collectively reveal liberalism's inability to account for what he terms "constitutive attachments"—those connections to community, tradition, and shared understandings that cannot be adequately conceptualised as voluntary associations subject to rational revision. Therefore, it can be argued that the communitarian critique goes beyond theoretical disagreements and exposes essential contradictions in liberalism's theoretical framework—contradictions that become particularly problematic when confronting environmental challenges.²⁷²

But what are the responses to the above critiques? Rawls responded to these communitarian challenges by reframing his theory as *political liberalism* rather than a comprehensive doctrine. In *Political Liberalism* (1993), Rawls deliberately extracts liberal theory from contested metaphysical claims about the self, situating it instead within the domain of political discourse and public reason. He argued that this conception was intended as a political conception of justice that applies to society's basic structure rather than as a comprehensive moral doctrine. He contends:

Thus, political liberalism looks for a political conception of justice that we hope can gain the support of an overlapping consensus of reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines in a society regulated by it [...] Political liberalism, then, aims for a political

²⁷¹ Mulhall, S., & Swift, A., pp.157-164

²⁷² Bell, D., pp.156-157

conception of justice as a freestanding view. It offers no specific metaphysical or epistemological doctrine beyond what is implied by the political conception itself.²⁷³

Rawls's political reframing attempts to define the scope of liberal theory by situating it within the domain of public reason rather than comprehensive doctrine. However, this manoeuvre can be understood as a problematic divergence that artificially separates political identity from deeper conceptions of the self. As Mulhall and Swift (1992) observe Rawls's attempt to position his theory as "political not metaphysical" doesn't effectively address the fundamental communitarian critique. It raises the question of whether it is possible to separate political sphere from questions of identity and conceptions of the good in the way Rawls's political liberalism attempts to do.²⁷⁴

This artificial separation contradicts the liberal claim of the rational autonomous individual when we consider that the very capacity for rational deliberation presupposed by Rawls's political conception remains embedded within particular traditions and social practices. The communitarian critique penetrates deeper than Rawls's political reformulation can accommodate, for it questions whether the liberal conception of public reason itself presupposes a particular metaphysical conception of the person—one already detached from constitutive attachments.

Furthermore, Mulhall and Swift contend that when Rawls frames his theory as political rather than metaphysical, he fails to recognise that any political framework inevitably contains implicit assumptions about human nature and personhood. This oversight reveals a fundamental limitation in Rawls's approach—by attempting to support questions of the good and identity, political liberalism inadvertently introduces substantive assumptions about what constitutes reasonable political discourse.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Rawls, J. (1993). *Political Liberalism*. Columbia University Press, pp. 10-11

²⁷⁴ Mulhall, S., & Swift, A., pp. 223-246

²⁷⁵ Mulhall, S., & Swift, A., pp.191-222

Liberalism's pretensions to neutrality, its self-understanding as somehow above the substantive battle about how people should lead their lives may then seem highly misleading. Rather than acting as a neutral arbiter, it might be argued, the liberal state actually smuggles in, under the cover of its category of 'the right', its own particular understanding of how people should live, its own ideal of what makes a life a good one. Instead of eschewing judgements about what makes life valuable, liberalism consists essentially of the claim that a good life is one which has been freely or autonomously chosen by the person living it. It is in accordance with this claim that the political community supports some ways of life and rules out or discourages others, such as those that require state perfectionism. Far from remaining above the fray, liberalism is built on a particular substantive view about what constitutes people's good, about what are people's essential interests, and talk about the priority of the right over the good only serves to conceal this crucial point.²⁷⁶

The paradox is apparent: the very capacity for public reason that Rawls's political liberalism requires is itself cultivated within particular social contexts and traditions, making the political-metaphysical distinction complex. Therefore, the communitarian insight that the self is constituted through its attachments penetrates Rawls's supposedly non-metaphysical political domain, rendering thus his attempt to isolate liberal principles from deeper questions of identity and value problematic.

Rawls himself came to recognise certain limitations in his theory's applicability, such as its universalism. He acknowledges that:

An immediate consequence of taking our inquiry as focused on the apparent conflict between freedom and equality in a democratic society is that we are not trying to find a

²⁷⁶ Mulhall, S., & Swift, A., p.32

conception of justice suitable for all societies regardless of their particular social or historical circumstances.²⁷⁷

Therefore, it can be argued that Rawls's assertion reflects a partial acknowledgment of the contextual embeddedness that communitarians emphasise. However, this acknowledgment does not resolve liberal universalism's self-contradiction: claiming universal validity while implicitly drawing upon historically specific traditions that it simultaneously disavows—precisely the kind of conceptual fragmentation that MacIntyre diagnoses as the core pathology of modern moral discourse.

Consequently, Rawls's political liberalism does not resolve but merely relocates the conceptual difficulties posed by communitarian critiques: that the liberal conception of the self presupposes itself a metaphysically contestable understanding of the self and identity that cannot be simply restricted to the domain of private comprehensive doctrines as Rawls intends.²⁷⁸

While Rawls attempted to side-step communitarian critiques through his political turn, other liberal theorists have sought more direct engagement with communitarian insights by partially acknowledging the situated nature of selfhood while preserving core liberal commitments such as individual rights and their priority. It is upon this theoretical landscape, that Will Kymlicka (1989) builds his argument: a complementary defence of liberalism that addresses the communitarian concern from a different angle. Rather than sidestepping metaphysical questions, Kymlicka directly confronts the alleged tension between liberal individualism and communitarianism's claim of social embeddedness maintaining that our capacity for choice and our identity are constituted within cultural frameworks. In other words, he argues that liberals can recognise the importance of cultural membership and consequently of community membership where certain traditions and values are represented, precisely because it enables

²⁷⁷ Rawls, J. (1980). Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 77(9), 515–572. p.518

²⁷⁸ Mulhall, S., & Swift, A., pp.223-224

individual autonomy and choice. In the liberal account of the self, individuals always have the choice to judge and accordingly reject established norms if they do not find them agreeable with their own perception of a good life.²⁷⁹ He argues that:

It is of sovereign importance to this argument that the cultural structure is being recognized as a context of choice. If we view cultural membership as a primary good within Rawls's scheme of justice, then it is important to remember that it is a good in its capacity of providing meaningful options for us, and aiding our ability to judge for ourselves the value of our life-plans.²⁸⁰

With this dialectical approach, Kymlicka attempts to show how liberal principles can simultaneously recognise the contextual nature of human identity while preserving the critical capacity to question and transform inherited social norms.

Amy Gutmann's (1985) intervention further enriches this dialectic approach by reconfiguring the terms of the debate itself. Her critique directly challenges what she terms the "tyranny of dualisms". She demonstrates how communitarian thinkers misattribute to liberalism a metaphysically impoverished conception of the self while simultaneously overemphasising community's role and value.²⁸¹

The critics' interpretive method is also mistaken. It invites us to see the moral universe in dualistic terms: either our identities are independent of our ends, leaving us totally free to choose our life plans, or they are constituted by community, leaving us totally encumbered by socially given ends; either justice takes absolute priority over the good or the good takes the place of justice; either justice must be independent of all historical and social

²⁷⁹ Kymlicka, W. (1989). *Liberalism, community, and culture*. Oxford University Press, p.75

²⁸⁰ Kymlicka, W. (1989). *Liberalism, community, and culture*. Oxford University Press, p. 166

²⁸¹ Gutmann, A. (1985). Communitarian Critics of Liberalism. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 14(3), 308–322.

particularities or virtue must depend completely on the particular social practices of each society; and so on.²⁸²

By questioning this binary approach, Gutmann creates conceptual space for a more all-encompassing understanding of the self that acknowledges both the importance of individual agency and social embeddedness. Rather than positioning liberalism and communitarianism as mutually exclusive frameworks, she proposes a synthesis that incorporates communitarian insights while preserving liberalism's normative commitments:

Communitarianism has the potential for helping us discover a politics that combines community with a commitment to basic liberal values. The critics' failure to undermine liberalism suggests not that there are no communitarian values but that they are properly viewed as supplementing rather than supplanting basic liberal values. [...] The potential of communitarianism lies, I think, in indicating the ways in which we can strive to realize not only justice but community through the many social unions of which the liberal state is the super social union.²⁸³

Gutman's analysis functions like a bridge that attempts to connect the opposed theories of liberalism and communitarianism. By challenging this *tyranny of dualisms*, she demonstrates how communitarian insights can actually supplement and enrich liberal values rather than displacing them.

Yet the liberal-communitarian debate has not remained confined to these foundational exchanges. The communitarian critique of liberal individualism — its diagnosis of the unencumbered self, the fragmentation of moral language, and the social constitution of identity — has continued to generate important intellectual developments beyond the canonical figures examined in this thesis. One significant strand of recent scholarship brings together civic

²⁸² Gutmann, A., pp. 316-317

²⁸³ Gutmann, A., p.320

republican theory and environmental political thought, as well as green political theory, under the banner of 'green republicanism', extending the communitarian critique of liberalism directly into the environmental domain. Drawing on Sandel's republican dimensions, scholars have taken up and developed republican ideas in environmental contexts, arguing that civic republican commitments to community, stewardship, and intergenerational obligation are compatible with green political goals. Cannavò (2016) observes that:

Like republicanism, environmentalism tends to be non-neutral regarding the good and has strong communitarian overtones. Environmental issues are not just about pollution, public health, or even human survival, but also about how ecologically-oriented practices and policies can promote key human values or human flourishing and / or the flourishing of non-human nature. [...] Consequently, like republicans, many environmentalists emphasize the common good or common goods and self-sacrifice over negative liberty and private interest. Green politics is a collective enterprise oriented to the flourishing of not only the individual but also the larger community.²⁸⁴

Similarly, Barry and Smith (2008) argue that civic republicanism and environmentalism share significant convergences that extend this communitarian orientation in a specifically environmental direction:

In contrast to the dominant versions of liberalism and conservatism, both of which emphasise an individualistic conception of freedom as non-interference (either with personal lifestyle choices, economic behaviour or 'tradition') and an optimistic view of humans' ability to transcend their limits, republicanism emphasises the duties of citizenship and the individual's dependence on a specific historical community as it is embedded in a particular natural environment. Indeed, civic republicanism is vitally

²⁸⁴ Cannavò, P. (2016). Environmental Political Theory and Republicanism. In T. Gabrielson, C. Hall, J. M. Meyer, & D. Schlosberg (Eds), *Environmental Political Theory and Republicanism* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.

concerned with the key challenge of sustainability— how to extend the life of a specific historical community and its cherished and hard-won values and practices, especially freedom, in a world ruled by forces beyond full human control. The republican conception of the human condition is, in key respects, the same as the green conception: It acknowledges humans’ complex relations of dependence on natural forces outside our control, our limited understanding of those relationships and forces, the (relatively) fixed ecological limits within which human society can flourish.²⁸⁵

This republican understanding of the human condition resonates closely with the framework developed in this thesis. The diagnosis is shared: liberal individualism, and in particular its expression in the model of the economic man, undermines the force of membership, loyalty, tradition, and historical narrative, severing individuals from the constitutive relationships and particular places that ground durable environmental commitment. Crucially, however, these relationships are not the voluntary associations that liberals tend to acknowledge, formed on the basis of self-interest and mutual advantage. They are constitutive of identity itself, cultivated through shared practices, traditions, and narratives, and inseparable from the particular places in which communities are embedded. It is precisely this territorial dimension — the dependence of a historical community upon a particular natural environment, as Barry and Smith articulate it — that is central to the account of *oikophilia* developed in this thesis and to the broader argument about liberal disconnection from place advanced in section 7.3.2. What the *civic virtue environmentalism* proposed here adds to this republican framework, however, is a grounding not only in the political and civic dimensions of the human condition but in the moral sphere as well. Republicanism correctly identifies the structural problem and points toward the kind of

²⁸⁵ Barry, J., & Smith, K. (2008). Civic Republicanism and Green Politics. In D. Leighton & S. White (Eds), *Building a Citizen Society: The Emerging Politics of Republican Democracy*. Lawrence & Wishart Ltd.

community and citizenship required to address it. But identifying the political conditions for environmental responsibility is not the same as cultivating the character capable of sustaining it. The specific virtues of *phronēsis* and *oikophilia* — developed in the later chapters of this thesis — are proposed precisely as the moral foundation that completes and deepens the green republican political framework, anchoring civic responsibility in the dispositions of the situated self rather than leaving it at the level of institutional design alone.

Within this broader green republican framework, Caroline Bohn (2021) has argued specifically that deliberative citizen participation processes addressing sustainability issues ought to foster *phronēsis* — understood as political judgement formation oriented toward the common good — in order to facilitate the transformation of individual preferences. This engagement with *phronēsis* within green republican scholarship represents a significant development in the field and one that shares important affinities with the account of *civic virtue environmentalism* developed in this thesis, though the two approaches are grounded in different theoretical traditions and make different philosophical moves. The relationship between the green republican *phronēsis* and the civic environmental *phronēsis* advanced here is examined more fully in Chapter 9.

In this section I have examined the liberal-communitarian debate through its historical trajectory and theoretical underpinnings, highlighting the fundamental tensions regarding conceptions of the self — tensions that, as this final development in the scholarship demonstrates, have found direct expression in environmental political thought. This analysis demonstrates that these tensions extend beyond the theoretical domain: the ontological and normative assumptions embedded in these competing traditions raise questions not merely about the relationship between individual and community in isolation, but about the profound implications this relationship holds for how we conceptualise, frame, and address contemporary environmental challenges.

If liberals acknowledge the constitutive role of community in identity formation and the contextual nature of moral reasoning, how does this theoretical concession then fail to translate

into practices that move beyond individualistic solutions, and towards coordinated, responsible and meaningful environmental attitudes? Can the *economic man* of liberalism— defined by self-interest and the priority of rights— substantively contribute to environmental sustainability when such challenges inherently require prioritising the common good over individual preference satisfaction?

The following subsection provides a diagnostic analysis that identifies specific failures of liberal individualism when confronted with environmental challenges. This diagnosis prepares the groundwork for Chapter 8's examination of communitarian conceptions of the self and their advantages in addressing environmental concerns. Finally, in Chapter 9 I move beyond critique toward a constructive framework, where I systematically categorise limitations of liberal environmental approaches and I develop a robust communitarian alternative ethical framework capable of identifying, understanding and addressing environmental responsibilities.

7.3 The Environmental challenge to Liberal Individualism

Environmental degradation represents both a practical illustration and theoretical test case of the liberal-communitarian debate. As De-Shalit argues:

Indeed, economic and self-interested individualistic preferences could easily lead to the continuing depletion of scarce resources, be they oil, clean air, or scenic landscape.²⁸⁶

The environmental crises of recent decades expose significant inadequacies in liberal theory's emphasis on individual preference and voluntary association. This individualistic approach reveals fundamental limitations in applying atomistic conceptions of the self to complex environmental challenges that are inherently communal, territorial and moral in nature. These challenges pose a threefold trial to the liberal framework: they interrogate its conception of the self, question the priority of the right over the good, and reveal the limitations of the liberal, free-market

²⁸⁶ De-Shalit, A. (2000). *The Environment: Between Theory and Practice*. Oxford University Press, p. 96

approaches to substantive environmental problems. These challenges manifest in three distinct but interconnected dimensions: the atomisation of environmental responsibility, the disconnection from territorial context, and the inadequate conception of responsibility.

7.3.1 The Atomisation of Environmental Responsibility

Firstly, the *atomisation* of environmental responsibility manifests in the liberal individualism's tendency to reduce environmental responsibility into atomised, discrete, often superficial actions. Such actions, while not inherently negative, become mere performative gestures when detached from substantive moral contexts and the broader social fabric. Consider how an individual might engage in recycling primarily as a form of moral self-validation, while remaining disconnected from pressing environmental challenges within their immediate locality—such as a transnational corporation's exploitation of local forest resources. This disengage illuminates how the liberal framework's emphasis on autonomous individual choice and action can actually undermine meaningful environmental engagement. Its focus on the aggregation of individual preferences—often mediated through market mechanisms like carbon offsets or sustainable product certifications—fails to acknowledge how environmental problems often represent collective action dilemmas that cannot be resolved by prioritising individual choice alone.²⁸⁷

Michael Maniates (2001) articulates this phenomenon through his concept of *individualisation of responsibility* and argues that:

By contrast, the individualization of responsibility, because it characterizes environmental problems as the consequences of destructive consumer choice, asks that individuals imagine themselves as consumers first and citizens second. Grappling with the consumption problem, moreover, means engaging in conversation both broadly and deeply about

²⁸⁷ See Chapter 6 for my detailed analysis of collective action problems through Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* and Ostrom's community-based solutions.

consumerism and frugality and ways of fostering the capacity for restraint. But when responsibility for environmental ills is individualized, space for such conversation disappears : the individually responsible consumer is encouraged to purchase a vast array of “green” or “eco-friendly” products on the promise that the more such products are purchased and consumed ,the healthier the planet ’s ecological processes will become. “Living lightly on the planet” and “reducing your environmental impact,” becomes paradoxically a consumer-product, growth industry.²⁸⁸

Building on this analysis it is evident how environmental responsibility gets commodified, wherein environmental concerns are systematically transformed into prescribed market activities rather than substantive civic engagement. This transformation exemplifies the paradigm of liberalism’s “economic man”—the atomised, utility-maximising individual whose environmental concern is expressed primarily through consumption choices rather than substantive action. Such reductionism relocates environmental ethics from the public sphere of collective deliberation and citizenship to the private realm of consumer choice and individual preference.

This atomistic approach to environmental problems is further complicated by liberalism’s commitment to neutrality regarding conceptions of the good, in order to protect the priority of individual autonomy and rights—in that case, consumer rights. However, environmental degradation demands at least some conception of the common good with substantive value commitments and shared ethical frameworks. Mark Sagoff (1988) argues that:

[...], not all of us think of ourselves primarily as consumers. Many of us regard ourselves as citizens as well. As consumers, we act to acquire what we want for ourselves individually; each of us follows his or her conception of the good life. As citizens, however, we act through and on behalf of social institutions. We may deliberate over and then seek to

²⁸⁸ Maniates, M. F. (2001). Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World? *Global Environmental Politics*, 1(3), 31–52, p.34

achieve together a conception of the good society. Our beliefs, moral convictions, and goals as citizens – indeed, as moral beings – may have and probably should have little relationship to what we believe benefits us personally. This cuts any actual link that might erroneously be thought to exist between WTP and benefit.²⁸⁹

This tension between consumer identity and civic engagement reveals how liberalism's neutrality regarding conceptions of the good poses a fundamental obstacle to environmental stewardship, which demands substantive shared ethical commitments. This challenge is further exacerbated by liberalism's tendency to interpret individual freedom primarily through an economic lens, as discussed in previous chapters, reinforcing thus a problematic separation between private values and public engagement. The ethical foundations required for genuine environmental responsibility are better cultivated within a robust framework of citizenship, that transcends the limitations of liberal economic discourse, where market rationality often replaces collective environmental imperatives.

Extending this critique of liberal neutrality to the notion of *environmental citizenship* Andrew Dobson (2007) articulates a critical distinction between attitude-driven and behaviour-driven approaches to environmental responsibility. He argues that environmental citizenship operates at a deeper level than conventional policy interventions by addressing the underlying attitude tendencies that inform behavioural choices. While mainstream environmental policies primarily deploy economic incentives to modify behaviour, Dobson argues that genuine environmental citizenship requires individuals to situate their actions within a framework of justice and injustice. The environmental citizen, according to this conception, is motivated not by economic calculations of rewards and sanctions but by a recognition of their duty to "live sustainably so that others may live well". This perspective reframes environmental action as an ethical imperative rather than a consumer choice. Dobson suggests that behaviour motivated by such citizenship considerations—

²⁸⁹ Sagoff, M. (2008). *The economy of the Earth: Philosophy, law, and the environment* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press, p.44. (Original work published in 1988)

rooted in understanding the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations—is likely to produce more enduring changes than behaviour merely responsive to financial incentives. This analysis challenges the predominant liberal approach that reduces environmental responsibility to individual market-based decisions, suggesting instead that substantive and sustained environmental stewardship requires a deeper reconceptualization of civic duty and collective ethical commitment.²⁹⁰

This problematic neutrality extends beyond individual ethical contexts to permeate institutional structures and environmental governance mechanisms. Sagoff demonstrates how attempts to base environmental policy exclusively on individual interests and preferences prevent us from addressing the normative and cultural contexts in which environmental problems arise:

First, no meaningful connection holds between WTP (Willingness to Pay), and any normative concept – any concept of the good – not trivially defined in terms of it. I shall return to this thought in later chapters. Why is something valuable or good from a societal point of view because or insofar as an individual is willing to pay for it? Having a preference may give that individual a reason to try to satisfy it – but not necessarily society. Individuals may pursue their own interests on their own; they should be free to do so. It does not follow, however, that the preferences of individuals taken in the aggregate provide the appropriate basis for social policies, values, or judgments. Why would anyone believe that whatever a person happens to want anything for which he or she is willing to pay – is to that extent valuable from a societal perspective? A social welfare function—a method to aggregate the preferences of all individuals into a “social” preference even if it were possible, expresses the moral theory of a two-year-old: “I want it; therefore, it is good.” Who believes this? If

²⁹⁰ Dobson, A. (2007). Environmental citizenship: Towards sustainable development. *Sustainable Development*, 15(5), 276–285, p.282

you contribute to the Ku Klux Klan, does that make the KKK better? It only makes you worse.²⁹¹

Moreover, this individualisation process creates what I term an *ethics of distraction*—a psychological mechanism through which individuals engaged in consumerist practices attempt to resolve their environmental cognitive dissonance through performative eco-conscious consumption rather than substantive behavioural change. This concept differs from existing frameworks such as *moral licensing* (Merritt et al., 2010), *green consumption guilt* (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014), and *environmental cognitive dissonance* (Thøgersen, 2004) found in *Environmental Ethics and Consumer Psychology* literature. It extends beyond these frameworks by specifically addressing three distinct dimensions: the self-directed nature of ethical deception, the active deployment of consumption as environmental guilt management, and the particular context of environmental responsibility where collective harm is mediated through individual market choices. Unlike moral licensing, which examines how past virtuous behaviour justifies subsequent harmful actions, *ethics of distraction* reveals how individuals simultaneously engage in both environmentally harmful and performatively beneficial consumption as a coherent psychological strategy that maintains systemic consumption patterns while providing superficial ethical relief.

This *ethics of distraction* operates by essentially distorting our inherited sociality. The distracted individual becomes limited in their capacity to understand their social embeddedness, unable to look beyond themselves to perceive the wider ecological and social systems of which they are an integral part. Extreme individualism actively distracts us from seeing the whole—from recognising that individual actions are always situated within, and consequential for, collective structures. Through this mechanism, attention is diverted from the real causes of environmental

²⁹¹ Sagoff, M. (2008). *The economy of the earth: Philosophy, law, and the environment* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press, pp. 30-3

degradation toward personal consumption habits, transforming what should be a civic and collective concern into an atomised series of private purchasing decisions.

The paradox becomes evident: environmental protection itself becomes subsumed within growth-oriented market reasoning. By reducing environmental ethics to consumer choice, we transfer environmental responsibility from the civic sphere of engagement and understanding to the economic domain of individual preference—essentially applying market principles, when, paradoxically, it is precisely this invasive marketisation of most aspects of our private and social life that drives environmental degradation.

In this context, MacPherson's concept of *possessive individualism*, which I analysed extensively in Chapter 3 as foundational to liberalism's misinterpretation of freedom, provides crucial analytical insight. As demonstrated there, liberalism conceives individuals primarily as proprietors of themselves, where individual freedom is narrowly translated into economic freedom within market societies. This possessive individualism—characterised by its understanding of the individual as essentially the owner of their capacities, owing nothing to society—fundamentally shapes liberal conceptions of environmental engagement. As MacPherson argues:

Locke's individualism does not consist entirely in his maintaining that individuals are by nature free and equal and can only be rightfully subjected to the jurisdiction of others by their own consent. To leave it at that is to miss its main significance. Fundamentally it consists in making the individual the natural proprietor of his own person and capacities, owing nothing to society for them.²⁹²

This same logic manifests in the environmental context, as the atomisation of environmental responsibility: environmental concern becomes merely another expression of consumer preference

²⁹² Macpherson, C.B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford University Press. p.253

rather than meaningful environmental engagement and responsibility. This connection illuminates why liberal frameworks, with their emphasis on possessive individualism, fundamentally constrain the capacity to address collective environmental challenges that require responses beyond individual market choices. As Marius de Geus (2001) notes, one of the shortcomings of liberalism in relation to sustainability lies within the Lockean heritage of individualism, and the idea of man's domination over nature. He argues that:

Liberalism presumes human beings who are relatively self-centred, focus on their own interests, follow their own will and want to realize their own life-plans. As a matter of fact, the basis of modern liberal political theory can be found in John Locke's 'individualism' as described by C. B. Macpherson in his *The Theory of Possessive Individualism*. [...] The implication is that in a liberal society the citizens mainly assert their individuality by means of accumulating property, buying consumer goods and following their desires, without accepting limits to their freedom. According to this Lockean credo, liberalism is principally a defence of the individual's right to inequality in possessions, expanding property and human desires, rather than a defence of the purposes of society as a whole to – for instance – a clean environment and nature conservation.²⁹³

Interestingly, De Geus suggests that liberalism may address these shortcomings by adopting Mill's paradigm, which emphasises individuality over Lockean individualism.

In the third chapter of *On Liberty*, Mill argues that, rather than self-centredness and individualism, the free development of 'individuality' is one of the essential preconditions of well-being (Mill, 1976, p. 120). In contrast to Locke, John Stuart Mill does not concentrate on the preservation of the right to material possessions, but on a much wider doctrine of liberty in which freedom is defined in terms of pursuing our own good in our way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it' (Mill,

²⁹³ Barry, J., & Wissenburg, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Sustaining Liberal Democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp.28-29

1976, p. 72). In his *Principles of Political Economy*, contrary to Locke, Mill warns sharply against man's domination of nature. He explains that there is not much satisfaction in contemplating a world where nothing is left to the spontaneous activity of nature [...].²⁹⁴

As I extensively discussed in Chapter 2, Mill's conception of individuality represents a significant departure from the atomistic individualism that characterises much of liberal thought. While Mill champions individual liberty, his notion of individuality emphasises human development, diversity, and the realisation of potential within a broader social context—qualities that could potentially make his vision of liberalism more receptive to environmental concerns. Unlike the atomistic views of his predecessors, Mill's perspective values the dynamic interaction between individual flourishing and social harmony, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of the liberal self. This richer conception aligns with De Geus's suggestion that liberalism might address its environmental shortcomings by embracing Mill's idea of individuality rather than adhering to Lockean individualism. Mill's warning against human domination of nature further reinforces this potential compatibility, as does the Aristotelian resemblance in his conception of the self as noted by Albert Levi (1959).²⁹⁵

Specifically, Mill's conception directly addresses the problem of atomisation by recognising individuals as socially embedded beings whose development occurs in relation to others and to nature, rather than as isolated preference-maximisers. This more relational understanding of selfhood creates conceptual space for environmental responsibility based on recognition of interdependence rather than mere aggregation of preferences. Thus, Mill's distinctive interpretation of liberalism, with its emphasis on a more socially embedded individuality, may offer conceptual resources for responding to the first dimension of the environmental challenge—the atomisation of responsibility—that more atomistic versions of liberalism cannot provide.

²⁹⁴ Barry, J., & Wissenburg, pp.33-34

²⁹⁵ Levi, A. W. (1959). *The Value of Freedom: Mill's Liberty* (1859-1959). *Ethics*, 70(1), 37–46.

Despite Mill's more promising conceptual framework, his approach still operates within certain limitations inherent to the liberal tradition. While his notion of individuality acknowledges social embeddedness and warns against nature's domination, Mill's individual, is still not inherently rooted in particular landscapes or ecosystems. This becomes particularly significant when we consider that environmental problems are always situated in specific geographical contexts, affecting particular communities and ecosystems in concrete ways. As I discuss in the next subsection, the challenge of territorial disconnection presents additional complexities that require further consideration

7.3.2 Disconnection from Territorial Context

The collective nature of environmental problems demands recognition that effective responses emerge through the dynamic interaction between individuals within spatially and socially situated communities. The *territory* and *locality* serve as crucial mediating factors through which environmental challenges are understood, experienced, and addressed. This perspective doesn't negate individual agency but rather reconceptualises it within the framework of community relationships and civic engagement.²⁹⁶

Liberal theory's emphasis on abstract universalism and procedural justice struggles to accommodate the place-based knowledge and territorial attachments that environmental action requires. As Bryan Norton (2005) argues, environmental problems are inherently *contextual and place-based*, requiring what he terms a *community-based environmental pragmatism* rather than abstract universal principles.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ For the purposes of this argument, I use the terms "land," "territory," and "place" interchangeably, though I acknowledge these concepts carry distinct meanings and significance within environmental ethics—particularly between "land" as ecological/biological reality and "place" as phenomenologically experienced, culturally meaningful space. A comprehensive analysis of these terminological differences lies beyond the scope of this work. For foundational discussions of these conceptual distinctions, see Leopold (1949); Tuan (1977); Relph (1976); Rolston III (1988); and Callicott (2014).

²⁹⁷ Norton, B. G. (2005). *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*. University of Chicago Press

It is an advantage of our approach to environmental values that, since we seek values that exist within communities, and since we have limited the scope of our policy analysis to communities that have undertaken an ongoing, community-based, adaptive management process, we can assume that participants implicitly accept obligations associated with communicative action. The community has placed a value on achieving cooperative solutions to shared problems. It may seem a bit odd to refer to such values as environmental in nature, but they are at least environmental in the sense that a commitment to seek cooperative solutions with one's cohorts, rather than to resort to violence, apathy, or raw political power, represents a value that can deeply affect the process of achieving sustainable living.²⁹⁸

It can be argued that Norton's position represents an environmental ethics that aligns with communitarian principles and recognises the importance of pragmatic engagement. By locating environmental values within communities rather than abstract ideals, he challenges conventional approaches to environmental ethics that prioritise universal principles or individual rights. He acknowledges that genuine environmental stewardship emerges through practical collaborative engagement in specific places and contexts, where communities have already committed to adaptive management processes. This place-based approach acknowledges that environmental problems cannot be adequately addressed through the lenses of detached liberal universalism but require instead the cultivation of territorial attachments and situated knowledge particular to specific ecosystems and communities. Norton's theoretical argument aligns with Ostrom's empirical research on common-pool resource management, which I analysed extensively in Chapter 5 of the thesis. This alignment between Norton's environmental pragmatism and Ostrom's institutional analysis reveals how community-centred approaches operate simultaneously as ethical frameworks and practical governance mechanisms. Where Norton

²⁹⁸ Norton, B. G. (2005). *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*. University of Chicago Press, p.362

provides the philosophical underpinnings for situated environmental ethics, Ostrom offers the practical validation through her research on successful community governance systems of common pool resources. This complementary approach creates a conceptual bridge that allows to establish a coherent theoretical foundation for understanding environmental ethics as necessarily embedded within communal practices and place-based knowledge systems.

Similarly, drawing upon agrarian communities in the United States, Paul Thompson (2010) in *The Agrarian Vision: Sustainability and Environmental Ethics* emphasises the importance of community embeddedness and locality as a contrast to the universalist tendencies that neoliberal policies have promoted within America's agricultural systems. He notes that:

Liberal and neoliberal political theories tend to presume that morality and justice depend on characteristics that can be applied universally to all persons and in any situation. It is the specificity of the people to whom reciprocal moral relations are owed that animates the agrarian vision. What is more, unique personal and role-dependent aspects of a person's identity must be recognized for these moral relations to become effective. In stressing reciprocity and recognition, the agrarian way of understanding moral relationships also gives rise to a conception of community as a group of specific individuals pursuing life at a particular place. It is each individual's commitment to the place that binds them together as a community, not an abstract commitment to others' rights or welfare.²⁹⁹

The foregoing analysis illuminates how that liberalism's prioritisation of the abstract detached individual, the unencumbered self, conflicts with the requirements of environmental stewardship. Characterised by rootless universalism, social mobility, individual autonomy, and voluntary association, the liberal conception of the self lacks the spatial knowledge, moral foundations and territorial attachments that are identified as essential for addressing place-based

²⁹⁹ Thompson, P. B. (2010). *The agrarian vision: Sustainability and environmental ethics*. University Press of Kentucky, p. 102

environmental challenges.³⁰⁰ By privileging choice and mobility over embeddedness and permanency, liberalism undermines the formation of the situated self who develops the long-term commitments, local knowledge, and intergenerational perspective necessary for sustainable environmental governance. This tension reveals a fundamental contradiction: effective environmental stewardship requires precisely the forms of social embeddedness, place-based identity, and communal obligation that liberal theory tends to subordinate to individual rights and abstract principles of justice.

The decontextualisation of environmental challenges exemplifies liberalism's tendency to abstract environmental problems from their social and ecological contexts, treating them as technical challenges rather than embedded social practices. This detachment is evident in the dominating landscape of environmental policy, which favours technological solutions and market mechanisms, eroding thus the relationship between human-nature, as well as the meaningful engagement that results from this awareness.

The philosophical roots of this disconnection from territorial context can be traced to the foundational tenets of liberal individualism, particularly as articulated in Locke's theory of autonomy and property, which I have thoroughly analysed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. As demonstrated earlier, Macpherson's interpretation of Locke's possessive individualism provides the conceptual foundation for understanding contemporary environmental challenges. Locke's introduction of money as a mechanism to overcome the spoilage limitation fundamentally transforms our relationship to territory. As I argued in Chapter 3, this theoretical move permits

³⁰⁰ Many scholars have emphasised the foundational role of place in environmental ethics, arguing that place-sensitive approaches provide essential frameworks for understanding complex environmental problems. These frameworks reveal how place-attachment mediates human relationships with ecological systems, enabling recognition of environmental challenges as multidimensional phenomena that encompass not merely biophysical processes but also disruptions to cultural meaning, historical continuity, and community identity. Such nuanced understanding resists reductive technical frameworks and thereby facilitates more contextually appropriate policy responses. For further exploration, see: Seamon, D., & Mugerauer, R. (Eds.). (1985). *Dwelling, place and environment: Towards a phenomenology of person and world*. Springer Netherlands.; Sagoff, M. (1992). Settling America: The concept of place in environmental ethics. *Journal of Energy, Natural Resources and Environmental Law*, 12(2), 351-418.

unlimited appropriation, where land becomes valued not for its particular qualities or ecological relationships but for its abstract exchange value. The introduction of money rendered “unlimited appropriation feasible” by transforming land into capital and severing it from direct use-value relationships.³⁰¹ This conceptual transformation, from place to property, provides the philosophical groundwork for what Karl Polanyi (1944) would later identify as the separation of nature in the form of land from its social and ecological contexts.

Polanyi recognised that once land becomes priced, market systems dictate that the natural world must conform to market rationality, rather than economic structures adapting to the nature’s function. This inversion fundamentally undermines the integrity of land as both habitat and sustaining force within liberal market societies.

What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man’s institutions. To isolate it and form a market out of it was perhaps the weirdest of all undertakings of our ancestors. Traditionally, land and labor are not separated; labor forms part of life, land remains part of nature, life and nature form an articulate whole. Land is thus tied up with the organizations of kinship, neighborhood, craft, and creed—with tribe and temple, village, guild, and church. One Big Market, on the other hand, is an arrangement of economic life which includes markets for the factors of production. Since these factors happen to be indistinguishable from the elements of human institutions, man and nature, it can be readily seen that market economy involves a society the institutions of which are subordinated to the requirements of the market mechanism.³⁰²

This theoretical abstraction facilitated the conceptual separation of individuals from their territorial contexts, undermining the relations between human communities and their natural

³⁰¹ Macpherson, C.B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford University Press

³⁰² Polanyi, K. (2010). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Beacon Press. Originally published in 1944, p. 178

surroundings. When land becomes primarily a commodity, an abstract unit of exchange rather than a specific place with value in itself, environmental degradation follows as a logical consequence. The very language of 'resources' rather than 'places' or 'ecosystems' reveals this conceptual disconnection. Liberal environmental approaches typically address environmental challenges through the lens of resource management and market-based solutions rather than through substantive reconfigurations of human-nature relationships. This commodification of place stems directly from the possessive individualist conception of property established in Locke's theory. As previously discussed, Locke's theory separated appropriation from labour, elevating the former as an embodiment of full rationality and essential component of individual liberty, while reducing the latter to a possession exchangeable for money within market society.

This whole process of separating land from labour and detaching it from its social context results in a development and a sense of homelessness or placelessness. Sagoff characteristically describes this as "global homogenisation". He notes:

Placelessness and transience triumph in uniformity – the replication everywhere of the standardized surroundings from which one has just fled. This is not just America's problem: it is worldwide. Global unity we are told, presages global uniformity. Local cultures cannot stand up to forces unleashed by the global economy: forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerize the world with fast music, fast computers, and fast food – with MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald's, pressing nations into one commercially homogeneous global network: one McWorld tied together by technology, ecology, communications, and commerce.³⁰³

Sagoff's argument here represents the full realisation of what began with Locke's justification for unlimited appropriation, mobilisation and detachment from specific territories.

³⁰³ Sagoff, M. (2008). *The economy of the earth: Philosophy, law, and the environment* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press, pp. 160-161

When land becomes abstract capital, divorced from its use-value and personal labour, territorial specificity becomes increasingly irrelevant to economic decision-making. This global uniformity that Sagoff identifies constitutes the logical extension of possessive individualism transcending territorial boundaries.

The transformation of land into exchangeable capital changes human-place relationships in ways that facilitate placelessness rather than attachment. Although property rights establish formal legal connections to specific parcels, the Lockean framework paradoxically undermines substantive place-attachment by rendering land as replaceable commodity rather than unique place with value in itself. This abstraction privileges exchange value over intrinsic characteristics, effectively severing phenomenological experiences of place from legal ownership structures. The possessive individualism's emphasis on alienability of property—the right to transfer and sell—promotes ephemerality rather than permanence in our relationship with landscapes. When property becomes valuable primarily for its potential exchange rather than inherent qualities, decision-making becomes detached from environmental particularity, enabling capital mobility while diminishing meaningful engagement with specific places.

Therefore, it can be argued that liberalism's possessive individualist framework, by establishing property rights as prerequisite for individual liberty while simultaneously reducing land to abstract capital, facilitates the very sense of placelessness that characterises contemporary environmental challenges. This conceptual disconnection helps explain why formal ownership rights can coexist with profound ecological alienation in liberal market societies.

Furthermore, liberalism's emphasis on individual liberty and contractual relationships undermines the very place-based attachments necessary for environmental stewardship. As Polanyi argues

To separate labor from other activities of life and to subject it to the laws of the market was to annihilate all organic forms of existence and to replace them by a different type of

organization, an atomistic and individualistic one. Such a scheme of destruction was best served by the application of the principle of freedom of contract. In practice this meant that the noncontractual organizations of kinship, neighborhood, profession, and creed were to be liquidated since they claimed the allegiance of the individual and thus restrained his freedom. To represent this principle as one of noninterference, as economic liberals were wont to do, was merely the expression of an ingrained prejudice in favor of a definite kind of interference, namely, such as would destroy noncontractual relations between individuals and prevent their spontaneous re-formation.³⁰⁴

This disconnection from territory reveals another contradiction within liberal theory itself. The ideals of freedom and autonomy directly conflict with those of diversity and community. Liberal frameworks simultaneously attempt to protect and promote marginalised communities—through mechanisms like fairtrade schemes and recognition of indigenous rights—while undermining the very foundations of community through their conceptual apparatus. By prioritising individual autonomy, abstract rights, and the commodification of land as replaceable capital, liberalism systematically erodes the material and social conditions that sustain communal ways of life. What is understood as *resources* within liberal structures constitutes, in lived reality, complex socio-ecological systems that generate and maintain community structures, cultural and historical practices, and collective identities. This contradiction manifests in environmental ethics as a problematic tension between individual property rights and collective environmental responsibility—a structural antithesis embedded within the possessive individualist paradigm that especially Locke’s theoretical framework helped establish and legitimise.

In conclusion, the disconnection from territorial context that characterises contemporary environmental challenges has deep philosophical roots in liberal possessive individualism’s approach to property rights. Locke’s justification for unlimited appropriation through money, as

³⁰⁴ Polanyi, K. (2010). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Beacon Press. Originally published in 1944, p. 169

analysed in Chapter 3, provides the conceptual framework that allows for the abstraction of land from place, transforming our relationship to territory in ways that essentially undermine environmental responsibility. The key distinction lies in fostering individuals who possess civic responsibility cultivated through community membership rather than promoting atomised actors who pursue environmental actions in isolation. This reframing highlights how community contexts can provide the necessary foundation for meaningful environmental engagement. As Aldo Leopold (1948) recognised in his land ethic,

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.³⁰⁵

This community-oriented ethical perspective stands in contrast to liberal individualism's emphasis on rights and preferences detached from environmental contexts. It is, therefore, apparent that this disconnection from territorial context must be addressed not merely as a practical challenge but as a theoretical inadequacy within liberalism itself. The reconceptualisation of responsibility, which will be addressed next, requires recognising the situated nature of individuals within specific spatial, historical cultural and social contexts, an understanding that liberalism's possessive individualist framework undermines.

7.3.3 Inadequate Conception of Responsibility

From the discussion up to now it is apparent that there is a need for reconceptualisation of responsibility, one that necessitates a shift away from the abstract, individualistic paradigm of the liberal economic man and towards an understanding of responsibility as essentially relational and community-embedded. Individual responsibility, when properly conceived, develops through the cultivation of virtues within the specific context of the community. This contrasts with the homo economicus's rootless abstract concept of responsibility, which reduces environmental action to

³⁰⁵ Leopold, A. (1949). *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford University Press, p. 188

individual choice divorced from its social context and reconfigures civic engagement as mere market preference rather than embodied collective practice.

Such decontextualised individualistic approaches to responsibility often manifest in what I earlier referred to as *ethics of distraction*—where individuals receive a sense of moral validation through isolated superficial actions rather than engagement in developing civic virtue through community membership. Civic virtue and civic responsibility demand the recognition of social embeddedness within historical, cultural, and territorial contexts, as I discussed in the preceding sections. This recognition can provide the context for substantive character formation, which is essential for meaningful environmental engagement. In turn, the cultivation of character can transcend the superficial individualistic actions that merely reproduce the liberal economic ideas—a fixation on individual choice, market preference, and technocratic solutions.

The problem is apparent: rather than reducing consumption, the *ethically distracted* individuals in liberal societies seek moral absolution through the intentional consumption of ostensibly sustainable products while maintaining or even increasing their overall consumption patterns. This *empty* environmentalism raises critical questions about the perception of responsibility and civic engagement: Does the notion of fulfilling one's civic duties require nothing more than selective participation in green consumerism, thereby releasing individuals of deeper obligations to collective environmental stewardship and community engagement?

In his 1981 lecture at Notre Dame University, MacIntyre pinpoints the root cause of this problematic conception of responsibility identifying it as the *compartmentalisation* of modern moral life.

The thesis of compartmentalization is this: that increasingly all our lives are compartmentalized, so that as we move from the home to the workplace, to the meeting of the trade union branch, to the sports club, to some religious service in the parish, whatever it is, we move into and out of areas each of which has its own autonomous sets of norms,

each of which requires of us that we adapt to those norms if we are to be effective in that situation and in such a way that we have to exchange one set of attitudes and norms for the other as we move between them. So it comes about that a new virtue is added to the list of the virtues, adaptability; and a new vice is added to the list of the vices, inflexibility.³⁰⁶

MacIntyre's critique when applied to environmental contexts illuminates how environmental responsibility becomes distorted within the liberal free-market societies. The compartmentalisation he describes creates a condition in which individuals can maintain contradictory environmental commitments across different domains of life without experiencing cognitive dissonance. This fragmentation enables them to express their environmental concern through consumer choices while simultaneously participating in essentially unsustainable practices across other compartments of their lives. The valorisation of adaptability that MacIntyre notes manifests in environmental contexts as the capacity to effortlessly transition between performative green consumption and ecological disregard without experiencing moral contradiction.

This compartmentalised approach to environmental ethics reveals a deeper difficulty in our understanding of responsibility. Rather than seeing environmental concern as an integrated dimension of a coherent moral life, the compartmentalised individual views it as a discrete domain—one that can be adequately addressed through individualised consumption choices without challenging underlying patterns of environmental exploitation. The result is a contradiction: individuals who express environmental concern while being part of structures that cause environmental deterioration through overconsumption, but who sense no tension between these stances because they operate in different moral compartments. In other words, individuals demonstrate what MacIntyre refers to as the virtue of adaptation in detecting environmental problems that require attention and care, while also exhibiting the vice of inflexibility in their

³⁰⁶ MacIntyre, A. (2000). *A Culture of Death*. A Culture of Death, Notre Dame, Indiana, US.

consuming patterns. This contradiction creates the compartmentalisation that MacIntyre describes—a fragmented moral space in which moral agents seek moral refuge from their environmental dissonance through the *ethics of distraction*, satisfying ethical concerns not by reducing consumption but by redirecting it towards green consumption.

My proposed reconceptualisation of environmental responsibility requires moving beyond this compartmentalised moral framework and towards an authentic environmental concern which necessitates unity across the different aspects of one's life. Rather than existing as a separate domain of action, one that is often expressed through individual consumer choice as discussed above, meaningful environmental responsibility necessarily integrates with one's identity, ensuring that decisions across all life spheres reflect a consistent ethical character. This unified approach repositions environmental responsibility away from isolated consumer choices and towards meaningful participation in community life. Within this framework, community life is characterised by shared traditions, historical narratives, and cultural practices that are naturally linked with and informed by the community's relationship to territory. Consequently, such a communitarian attitude cultivates the civic and environmental values required to confront contemporary environmental challenges. It establishes a lasting basis of shared ethical commitments rather than short-term individualistic market orientated approaches.

By contrast, the liberal conception of responsibility with its emphasis on individual rights and preference, undermines these foundations for shared ethical commitments. The result is an understanding of morality that conceives obligations as originating from voluntary contractual relationships, whereas genuine environmental responsibility extends beyond this understanding of morality as it encompasses obligations towards one's community, including the environment. The problematic with the liberal conception of responsibility lies in its foundational assumption that individual responsibility stems from self-interest. In other words, that individuals will always act to maximise their personal benefit from any given situation, reflecting thus a utilitarian approach to ethical decision-making. However, such an assumption overlooks crucial relational

values that fundamentally shape both character development and one's understanding of responsibility itself. Values such as solidarity, mutual reliance, loyalty, communal bonds and care towards each other should be prioritised within any comprehensive account of responsibility, as these relational values are essential in cultivating responsibility toward both community members and the broader collective. As Thomson (2010) correctly observes:

The agrarian communities of the North American heartland were populated by self-reliant farmsteads, but self-reliance should not be understood in the sense of total self-sufficiency. These farm families valued their independence, but independence should not be understood as lacking the need for ties to a broader community. They depended on one another for barn raising and mutual aid, and this help had to be delivered on a timely basis if it was to be of any use at all. Such considerations conspire to support what we might call the principle of agrarian localism (PAL). When familiar themes of community solidarity and the enduring value of face-to-face loyalties are added to the mix, one arrives at a principle of political organization that confronts the one-size-fits-all universalism of utilitarian or rights-based ways of understanding civil society in a direct fashion.³⁰⁷

Thompson's example of agrarian localism illustrates precisely the kind of ethical framework that environmental responsibility demands. While this example draws from rural contexts, I argue that the underlying principle of place-based relational commitment applies equally to any form of territorial community, whether rural or urban. These communities demonstrate how genuine responsibility emerges not from contractual obligations or market incentives, but from the relational values of mutual dependence and face-to-face loyalty rooted in shared place and common purpose. This stands in stark contrast to liberalism's individualistic and universalistic approach, which abstracts responsibility from the concrete contexts of community and territory.

³⁰⁷ Thompson, P. B. (2010). *The agrarian vision: Sustainability and environmental ethics*. University Press of Kentucky, p.55

The agrarian model reveals that effective environmental stewardship requires the very forms of situated, relational commitment that liberal individualism dismisses.

7.4 Summary and Final Reflections

In this chapter I revisited the widely discussed liberal-communitarian debate to expose the limitations of liberal individualism in addressing environmental challenges. The conceptual divergences between these theoretical perspectives directly shape how environmental problems are approached within liberal free-market societies. Within these societies, the problematic conception of the self as autonomous and detached from community networks and social contexts undermines the recognition of collective obligations, which typically emerge from relationships of community membership and loyalties. Operating from a framework of self-interest and utilitarian calculation aimed at maximising personal pleasure and benefits, the economic man channels environmental concern primarily through eco-friendly consumption patterns and sustainable market choices. However, as environmental degradation intensifies, the limitations of liberal individualism become increasingly apparent. The atomisation of environmental responsibility, the disconnection from territorial and place-based contexts, and the problematic conception of responsibility all point towards the need for alternative theoretical frameworks capable of accounting for the communal and embedded nature of these challenges.

This realisation raises critical questions. How can the atomisation of environmental responsibility and prevailing consumption patterns be recognised by individual agents and transformed into meaningful engagement that generates substantive changes in consumption behaviour? What constitutes a viable alternative to the *ethics of distraction*, and would an environmental ethic that emphasises civic responsibility, community bonds and loyalties prove effective in overcoming both the tendency towards moral evasion and the atomistic interpretation of individual responsibility? How can the notion of territory and place identity transform the universalistic, abstract approach that individuals typically maintain towards environmental

problems? Finally, what does a comprehensive reconceptualisation of responsibility entail in terms of both theoretical and practical implementation?

The theoretical inadequacies in liberalism's interpretation of the relationship between individual and community necessitate a substantive reconceptualisation of the self—one that embraces an understanding of the self as fundamentally *situated* within its multidimensional social context. This social embeddedness encompasses various dimensions: the cultural narratives that add meaning to one's identity, the historical trajectories that inform contemporary circumstances, and the territorial and place attachments that ground abstract environmental concerns in lived experience and embodied knowledge.

The task of the reconceptualisation of responsibility emerges as a remedy to the limitations of liberal individualism in environmental challenges that I exposed in this chapter. It requires a shift in analytical perspective, beginning with the recognition that environmental responsibility constitutes an extension of civic responsibility, that develops primarily through the cultivation of civic virtues within community contexts. Achieving this transformation necessitates an alternative theoretical framework to liberalism, one that embraces the constitutive role of community in moral and civic development. Why? Because community functions as the essential apparatus that provides the social conditions necessary for cultivating the virtues that, in turn, foster the civic and environmental responsibility required to address contemporary environmental challenges effectively. In contrast to the liberal narrative that prioritises individual rights and preference satisfaction, communitarianism's emphasis on community embeddedness and the situated self, advances a conception of individual responsibility as both shaped by and contributing to the common good, creating a relationship between individual and collective flourishing.

The challenge of overcoming liberalism's limitations in environmental problems can thus be addressed through the alternative theoretical framework of communitarianism, which offers both conceptual and practical means for reconstituting environmental responsibility. It is to this

task, developing an account of the situated self within the communitarian framework which *necessitates* rather than merely accommodates environmental concern, that I now turn in Chapter 8. There, I set the ontological foundations of the situated self through the lenses of communitarianism, creating the conceptual ground upon which environmental virtues can be meaningfully constructed. Central to this effort is my argument that specific virtues, such as *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) and *oikophilia* (love of home), constitute fundamental elements of this new environmental ethic of civic virtue environmentalism, that transcends the limitations of liberal individualism while providing pathways for meaningful environmental action.

PART II

Chapter 8

The Situated Self: Community Foundations for Environmental Responsibility

Introduction

Having established the theoretical and practical limitations of liberal individualism in addressing environmental challenges, this chapter develops an alternative framework grounded in the communitarian perception of the self and virtue ethics. In my analysis in Chapter 7 I revealed how liberalism's conception of the *unencumbered* self generates three critical deficiencies: the atomisation of environmental responsibility, disconnection from territorial context, and an inadequate conception of responsibility itself. These limitations stem fundamentally from liberalism's commitment to the autonomous, detached individual who operates primarily through self-interested utilitarian calculations aimed at maximising personal utility and pleasure.

The atomised self — operating with a moral vocabulary attenuated to the language of rights, preferences, and individual choice — has proven inadequate for understanding and conceptualising genuine environmental responsibility. This is not to say that such a self is without moral commitments, but rather that the moral resources available within this framework are too thin to sustain the kind of responsibility that environmental challenges demand. Functioning as an independent agent, the liberal self reduces environmental engagement to personal lifestyle modifications and market-oriented consumption choices — approaches that, while not without value, remain superficial responses to the systemic nature of environmental degradation precisely because they leave intact the individualist ontology that generates environmental problems in the first place.

In this chapter I develop an alternative conception of selfhood: the *situated* self.³⁰⁸ Against the liberal conception of the autonomous individual critiqued in the previous chapter, I synthesise the complementary theoretical frameworks of Sandel, MacIntyre, and Taylor to develop a robust account of the situated self that positions community as *constitutive* of personal identity and essential for cultivating civic and environmental responsibility. This conceptual framework integrates three distinct yet interconnected dimensions of community embeddedness: MacIntyre's historical account of virtue as embedded within community traditions, Sandel's analysis of the impossibility of the unencumbered self, and Taylor's hermeneutic understanding of the self as situated within *moral space*. Through this synthesis, I demonstrate how the *situated* self emerges not as a pre-given entity but as a dynamic formation shaped by the historical, political, and moral dimensions of community life. What these three thinkers accomplish together, they cannot achieve separately: a *holistic* alternative to liberal individualism.³⁰⁹ Only their integration provides a comprehensive response to the environmental failures of atomistic liberalism by addressing the *historical, civic, and moral* dimensions of the *unencumbered* self's inadequacy. MacIntyre's contribution establishes the *historical* foundations of virtue cultivation, demonstrating how environmental virtues must be grounded in particular places and inherited traditions. Sandel's analysis reveals how *civic* responsibility emerges through community membership rather than individual choice, providing the political dimension necessary for understanding environmental obligation as an interaction between the individual and the collective. Taylor's hermeneutic

308 This analysis builds upon the established concept of the *situated* self developed by communitarian critics of liberalism, particularly Sandel's critique of Rawls's *unencumbered* self. Rather than introducing this foundational concept, I extend its analytical framework to examine how situatedness functions within civic and environmental responsibility, thereby applying established communitarian theory to the environmental domain.

³⁰⁹ Mackenzie, I. (2009). *Politics*. Continuum. p.100. Mackenzie characterises communitarianism as "a kind of liberal holism by contrast with liberal individualism," arguing that Sandel's "constitutive attachments" and Taylor's social thesis together demonstrate that individual autonomy requires commitment to shared culture. While Mackenzie notes MacIntyre as "a notable exception" to this liberal holism due to his more radical rejection of liberalism, this thesis employs MacIntyre's historical dimension to complete the civic and moral foundations provided by Sandel and Taylor, thereby constituting this holistic alternative to atomistic approaches to environmental responsibility.

approach illuminates how the self develops within *moral space*, and how community functions as the generative foundation for this.

The theoretical framework that emerges from this synthesis establishes the foundations for civic virtue environmental ethics as grounded in these three complementary dimensions of community life: historical and territorial attachment, civic responsibility, and moral development. This integration reveals how the situated self's constitutive relationships to place, tradition, and community provide the necessary conditions for cultivating environmental responsibility. Territorial attachment provides the historical and spatial foundations for environmental concern. Civic responsibility transforms individual preference into community flourishing and an understanding of the common good and one's obligations towards its advancement, while moral development within community generates the virtues necessary for environmental stewardship.

Central to this synthesis is the recognition that we are always already embedded within community—individuality remains valued within this framework, but we are never unencumbered. The situated self understands environmental responsibility as fundamentally relational rather than individualised, because meaningful identity emerges through dialogue with others and connection to the narratives, values, traditions, and historical trajectories that constitute our communities. This theoretical integration demonstrates how community functions as the moral generator and foundation for environmental virtue cultivation.

This communitarian approach offers a resolution to the apparent paradox in environmental ethics which identified in the previous chapter. While liberal critics might argue that the liberal self demonstrates greater environmental concern through its universal perspective on global problems, this apparent strength reveals liberalism's vital weakness.³¹⁰ The atomised self, understanding

³¹⁰ This stems from liberalism's universalistic tendency, which privileges abstract universal principles over particular attachments and local contexts. For example, the emphasis on universal human rights, cosmopolitan citizenship, and global justice frameworks—while valuable in addressing transnational challenges—devalues the particular bonds of place, culture, and community that provide the experiential foundations needed for environmental concern.

freedom primarily as economic freedom, has contributed directly to environmental degradation through unlimited appropriation and consumerism. Liberal environmental solutions remain oriented toward market mechanisms, perpetuating the very logic that generated environmental problems while undermining the moral authority of communities in transmitting environmental values.

The situated self offers a remedy because it transforms atomised responsibility into relational understanding of environmental obligation. This approach recognises the vital importance of territory and place, along with the historical, cultural and social meanings that motivate genuine environmental action. Most significantly, it enables proper comprehension of environmental responsibility as an extension of civic responsibility, cultivated through participation in community life rather than individual choice.

The chapter's analytical structure follows three interconnected sections that build dialectically to establish the theoretical foundations for *civic virtue environmentalism*. First, I examine the ontological shift from the atomised to situated self, drawing extensively from the complementary yet distinct contributions of Sandel, MacIntyre, and Taylor. The first section establishes the theoretical foundations by demonstrating how these three thinkers converge on a reconceptualisation of selfhood that challenges liberalism's unencumbered self. Sandel's critique reveals the impossibility of the autonomous individual through his analysis of constitutive attachments that precede choice. MacIntyre's historical dimension contributes the narrative understanding of identity formation within inherited traditions and practices. Taylor's hermeneutic insight completes this foundation by illuminating how the self emerges dialogically through *webs of interlocution* embedded in specific cultural and spatial contexts.

Second, I synthesise these theoretical contributions to develop a robust conception of the encumbered self and demonstrates its direct application to environmental responsibility. This synthesis reveals how environmental obligation emerges not through individual preference but

through constitutive relationships to place, community, and inherited practices. The section systematically addresses the three critical limitations of liberal individualism established in the previous chapter—atomisation, territorial disconnection, and inadequate conception of responsibility—by demonstrating how Sandel’s constitutive attachments, MacIntyre’s historical embeddedness, and Taylor’s dialogical formation provide superior theoretical foundations for understanding environmental engagement.

Third, I examine how communities function as contexts for virtue development, demonstrating how the situated self cultivates environmental responsibility through collective engagement. This section establishes communities as “moral laboratories” where individual capacity for environmental action develops through participatory dialogue and shared practices, providing the bridge between ontological foundations and the virtue cultivation that will be developed in subsequent analysis.

Through this analytical progression, the chapter establishes the ontological and theoretical groundwork necessary for *civic virtue environmentalism*. It demonstrates how the situated self emerges through constitutive attachments, narrative embeddedness, and dialogical formation, providing thus the ontological foundations necessary for understanding environmental responsibility as relational rather than atomistic. This foundation prepares the conceptual framework for subsequent analysis of specific environmental virtues and institutional mechanisms. The progression from ontological critique to synthetic reconstruction to community context maintains the primacy of philosophical analysis while establishing the theoretical foundations upon which a civic virtue environmental ethics can be constructed.³¹¹

³¹¹ It is worth noting that the three scholars examined in this thesis as proponents of communitarian thought have not self-identified with the “communitarian” label, and MacIntyre has explicitly rejected this characterisation. However, this terminological resistance does not diminish the substantive coherence of their shared critique of liberal individualism or their emphasis on community-based moral frameworks. Rather, their reluctance to embrace the label may reflect concerns about oversimplifying their distinct philosophical projects, while their substantive arguments remain mutually reinforcing in challenging atomistic conceptions of human flourishing.

8.1 The Ontological Shift: From Atomisation to Embeddedness

The contemporary environmental crisis reveals not merely a failure of policy or technology, but a deeper ontological problem: liberalism's conception of the self as prior to its ends proves inadequate for understanding the relational nature of environmental responsibility. Having established in the preceding chapter how the liberal conception of the self produces and maintains atomisation, territorial disconnection, and inadequate responsibility, I now turn to Sandel's analysis of constitutive attachments, MacIntyre's account of narrative identity, and Taylor's hermeneutic understanding of dialogical selfhood, in order to demonstrate how environmental responsibility emerges not through individual choice but through the social embeddedness that characterises human agency itself.

8.1.1 Sandel and the Impossibility of the Unencumbered Self

Sandel's critique of liberalism focuses on what he identifies as an essentially ontological error: the conception of the unencumbered self. He argues that the liberal conception of the self—particularly as articulated in Rawls's theory of justice—rests upon an impossible and ultimately incoherent understanding of human agency. The unencumbered self is conceived as existing prior to and independently of its ends, values, and attachments. This conception presents the self as a "subject of possession"—an autonomous agent that maintains a distance from its commitments, values, and social relationships while retaining the capacity to choose among them. The self, in this framework, possesses itself and in extension its ends rather than being constituted by them, enabling what liberals view as the highest value: the ability to evaluate, revise, or abandon one's commitments based on rational reflection.³¹²

³¹² It should be noted that in Rawlsian liberalism this conception is essential, because it enables the procedural priority that Rawls seeks to establish. If persons can maintain sufficient distance from their particular conceptions of the good, they can theoretically occupy the "original position" and choose principles of justice from behind the *veil of ignorance*.

On a deontological ethic, where the right is prior to the good, this means that what separates us is in some important sense prior to what connects us- epistemologically prior as well as morally prior. We are distinct individuals first, and then we form relationships and engage in co-operative arrangements with others; hence the priority of plurality over unity. We are barren subjects of possession first, and then we choose the ends we would possess; hence the priority of the self over its ends.³¹³

However, Sandel argues that this conception misinterprets the nature of human identity and moral agency. The impossibility of the unencumbered self stems from what he identifies as the false dichotomy between *who I am* and *what I value*. The liberal framework treats identity as something antecedent to and separable from one's deepest commitments, attachments, and community memberships.

[...] the Rawlsian self is not only a subject of possession, but an antecedently individuated subject, standing always at a certain distance from the interests it has. One consequence of this distance is to put the self beyond the reach of experience, to make it invulnerable, to fix its identity once and for all. No commitment could grip me so deeply that I could not understand myself without it. No transformation of life purposes and plans could be so unsettling as to disrupt the contours of my identity. No project could be so essential that turning away from it would call into question the person I am. Given my independence from the values I have, I can always stand apart from them; my public identity as a moral person 'is not affected by changes over time' in my conception of the good (Rawls 1980: 544-5):

313 Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press, p. 133. (Original work published in 1982)

Yet Sandel contends that this separation cannot be sustained because human identity is not merely possessed but constituted by our deepest commitments and relationships.

But we cannot regard ourselves as independent in this way without great cost to those loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are - as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic.³¹⁴

Against the liberal unencumbered self, Sandel proposes a constituted self—a conception of the self where identity is essentially constituted by community memberships, shared understandings, and moral commitments that cannot be chosen or abandoned without altering who one is. This conception of an encumbered self, or in other words a *situated* self, recognises that certain attachments and loyalties are not external possessions that can be evaluated and chosen or rejected from a neutral standpoint, but they are rather internal constitutive elements of identity itself. These constitutive attachments carry moral weight precisely because they precede individual choice, unlike the unencumbered self who evaluates and chooses among competing ends standing from a neutral point. As Sandel argues, we find ourselves already embedded within networks and traditions, memberships and loyalties that shape our moral understanding. And it is because of these constitutive attachments and the moral significance they carry that we can conceive the moral obligations we have towards the other members of these networks and our communities. Moreover, Sandel argues that character itself emerges from this constitutive embeddedness. To possess moral character means recognising that one “moves in a history neither summoned nor commanded”—a history that impacts one’s choices and conduct. It is this historical situatedness that makes moral agency meaningful. Our embedded position within particular traditions and

³¹⁴ Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press, p. 179

communities draws us closer to some people and distances us from others, making certain aims more appropriate and others less so.³¹⁵

8.1.2 MacIntyre's Historical Dimension: The Self as Narrative Unity

This historical situatedness constitutes the central axis of MacIntyre's critique against modern conceptions of the self.³¹⁶ MacIntyre (1989) argues that the self can only be understood through narrative unity—as individuals embedded within historical trajectories whose identities emerge through active participation in ongoing traditions. By contrast, the modern individual operates as a self-defining agent who lacks rational criteria for evaluating competing moral viewpoints. This absence of shared evaluative frameworks means that no common reference point for morality exists beyond individual preference.

Lewis Hinchman (1989) reinforces this critique by arguing that the emergence of the detached individual represents not merely a philosophical error but a transformation in the very nature of selfhood and the way that societies are organised. He argues that:

On MacIntyre's own reading of the transition from the classical-theistic scheme to the modern rule-dominated conception of morality, we encounter not only a passage from one way of thinking about morality to another but also a transformation in the very selves of the individuals who ask and answer moral questions [...] .They would cling to their own rule-oriented conception of morality not only because they believe it is correct, but because - and this point is implicit in MacIntyre's argument - as modern, de-situated selves they could not summon up any real sympathy for or understanding of a moral scheme designed

³¹⁵ Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press, p. 172

³¹⁶ While MacIntyre's critique in *After Virtue*—the primary source for this analysis—does not explicitly target liberal conceptions of the self or Rawlsian theory, his broader indictment of modernity implicitly encompasses these frameworks. His work has been positioned within the liberal-communitarian debate precisely because his conception of the self as constituted by social roles and narrative traditions directly challenges the liberal notion of the unencumbered self. Thus, although MacIntyre's critique operates at the level of modernity as a whole, his arguments align fundamentally with communitarian objections to liberal individualism.

for people utterly different from themselves, ones tightly integrated into a well-ordered, complex social whole whose norms and values are alien to them.³¹⁷

Therefore, the unencumbered self of liberalism reveals not only the moral fragmentation of modernity, as MacIntyre argues, but also a social fragmentation. Moral and social fragmentation operate in a mutually constitutive process, trapping modern societies in an inescapable crisis where a shared vision of the good is absent.

But since modern societies have fallen victim to a thoroughgoing moral disorder, politics can no longer perform the tasks it ought to perform. The only true source of authority and legitimacy has been put beyond the reach of modern states. They must endure a sort of perpetual legitimation crisis because the kind of order they seek to impose cannot be justified in light of any concrete, shared vision of the good.³¹⁸

Nevertheless, while Hinchman supports MacIntyre's critique of the detached self, he also disagrees with him in relation to the failure of the Enlightenment project. He argues that certain Enlightenment achievements—particularly human rights and individual autonomy—represent genuine moral progress that cannot simply be abandoned. He contends that certain social movements, such as women's rights, require precisely the kind of abstract freedom that MacIntyre dismisses.

To escape the domination of men demands that women strive for something like the autonomy promised by the Enlightenment, a kind of freedom attainable only for someone who can distance herself from her old identity and enter, temporarily, into the ghostly role of "no one." I would not pretend that this aspect of disengagement, abstract freedom, or negation, encompasses everything we mean by freedom. If it did, freedom really would be

³¹⁷ Hinchman, L. P. (1989). Virtue or Autonomy: Alasdair MacIntyre's Critique of Liberal Individualism. *Polity*, 21(4), 635–654. p. 649

³¹⁸ Hinchman, L. P. (1989). Virtue or Autonomy: Alasdair MacIntyre's Critique of Liberal Individualism. *Polity*, 21(4), 635–654. p. 646

an empty aspiration. But MacIntyre's depiction of the self, at least in a well-ordered society, as entirely absorbed by its social relationships is unsatisfactory.³¹⁹

In a similar line of argument regarding the unencumbered self, in their analytical examination of MacIntyre's work, Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift (1996) argue that his conception of the self demonstrates how individuals detached from these historical trajectories and traditions that provide a common reference point of morality cannot be said to have a history.

Such a person cannot be said to have a history; There is no way of telling an intelligible story of her movement through moral positions and through life- no narrative thread concerning the development or refinement of herself understanding. In effect, then, the modern self that hangs together with and is secreted from the social content of emotivism is fixed or bounded independently of any of its social embodiments or characteristics, and lacks a rational history. Neither its identity at any given time nor its identity over time are fixed by or dependent upon its attitudes, characteristics or life story; neither its personality nor its history are part of its substance; indeed, that substance assumes an abstract and ghostly character. More generally, of course, this emotivist conception of the self is strikingly similar to the conception of the person as antecedently individuated that Sandel attributes to Rawls.³²⁰

To restore this *ghostly* character and help him regain his purpose, MacIntyre undertakes the reconstruction of morality based on an Aristotelian ethic, where the cultivation of virtues is essential for achieving the human *telos* and the good life. The unencumbered self lacks purpose precisely because he has severed himself from a community that can provide the necessary means for achieving this *telos*. In Aristotelian philosophy, the *telos* can be realised only within the *polis*,

³¹⁹ Hinchman, L. P. (1989). Virtue or Autonomy: Alasdair MacIntyre's Critique of Liberal Individualism. *Polity*, 21(4), 635–654. p.652

³²⁰ Mulhall, S., & Swift, A. (1996). *Liberals and Communitarians* (Second Edition). Blackwell, p.76-77

since humans are fundamentally social animals who cannot achieve purpose outside the communal framework of the *polis*. However, since the conditions of the ancient *polis* cannot be directly applied to modern societies, MacIntyre's challenge is to identify what kind of community can fulfil this function. In other words, what type of community is necessary to revive this lost morality?

To accomplish this task of reconstructing a community grounded in virtue ethics, MacIntyre employs three central concepts: the narrative unity of human life, tradition, and practices. Through these concepts, he demonstrates what it means to be an encumbered self and how communities must be constitutive of individual identity. These three elements are interconnected because they can only be achieved within a community while simultaneously deriving their meaning from it. In essence, community functions as both the moral laboratory and the vehicle through which practices, narratives, and traditions are experienced, cultivated, developed, maintained, questioned, and transmitted. The specific mechanisms by which community cultivates situated selves will be examined in detail in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

MacIntyre's analysis thus reveals the ontological shift that has occurred in modern conceptions of selfhood—from the historically situated, narratively constituted individual embedded within communal traditions to the abstract, detached agent of liberal theory. This transformation represents more than a philosophical disagreement; it constitutes a crisis of moral and social fragmentation that undermines the very possibility of shared ethical discourse and social life. While critics like Hinchman acknowledge certain achievements of Enlightenment's individualism, particularly in advancing human rights and autonomy, MacIntyre's critique exposes the profound costs of this detachment: the loss of rational criteria for moral evaluation, the absence of shared visions of the good life, and the emergence of what he terms the *ghostly* character of modern selfhood.

The self thus conceived, utterly distinct on the one hand from its social embodiments and lacking on the other any rational history of its own, may seem to have a certain abstract and ghostly character.³²¹

The *encumbered* self that MacIntyre seeks to restore is not merely a return to pre-modern forms of community, but rather a recognition that human identity and moral purpose are necessarily constituted through participation in ongoing traditions and practices, that take place within a community.

8.1.3 Taylor's Hermeneutic Insight: The Dialogical Self

If Sandel demonstrates the impossibility of the unencumbered self and MacIntyre reveals how identity emerges through narrative participation in traditions, Charles Taylor provides the essential hermeneutic dimension that completes the ontological transformation from atomisation to embeddedness. Taylor's distinctive contribution lies not merely in critiquing liberal atomism but in articulating the philosophical architecture that explains how situated selfhood emerges through ongoing dialogical engagement.³²² Through his hermeneutic analysis, Taylor shifts the debate from the political realm—where liberals and communitarians argue about what we should prioritise—to the ontological realm, where he reveals what we essentially are as self-interpreting beings.

Taylor argues that liberalism's atomistic conception represents not merely a political preference but a misunderstanding of human nature itself.³²³ His vision is one of the *dialogical self*: beings who exist authentically within *webs of interlocution* and whose very capacity for moral agency depends on interaction with and recognition from others. This approach provides the

³²¹ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. p.60

³²² Taylor, C. (1989). Cross-purposes: The liberal-communitarian debate. In N. L. Rosenblum (Ed.), *Liberalism and the moral life* (pp. 159-182). Harvard University Press.p.160-161

³²³ Taylor, C. (1989). Cross-purposes: The liberal-communitarian debate. In N. L. Rosenblum (Ed.), *Liberalism and the moral life* (pp. 159-182). Harvard University Press.p.173

theoretical foundation for understanding why the situated self is not simply an alternative to the unencumbered self but rather the only possible form of authentic selfhood.

His analysis begins with a challenge to liberal conceptions of the self. He argues that this conception proves untenable because it lacks authenticity and excludes the *horizons of significance* that constitute the foundation of meaningful existence. The liberal framework envisions the individual as unencumbered, floating freely among selfish conceptions of freedom and self-discovery. Taylor argues that individuals cannot authentically define themselves or achieve genuine authenticity outside of these evaluative frameworks:

Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.³²⁴

This insight exposes a fundamental paradox within liberal theory: the supposedly self-sufficient individual depends entirely on collective meaning-making traditions that precede and constitute the very capacity for autonomous action. Even the liberal ideal of self-determining freedom relies on inherited understandings of what makes self-creation noble or significant:

Even the sense that the significance of my life comes from its being chosen - the case where authenticity is actually grounded on self determining freedom - depends on the understanding that independent of my will there is something noble, courageous, and

³²⁴ Taylor, C., (2003). *The Ethics of Authenticity* (11th printing). Harvard University Press. p. 40-41. (Original work published in 1991)

hence significant in giving shape to my own life. There is a picture here of what human beings are like, placed between this option for self-creation, and easier modes of coping out, going with the flow, conforming with the masses, and so on, which picture is seen as true, discovered, not decided. Horizons are given.³²⁵

Without such horizons, what appears as autonomous decision-making reduces to arbitrary preference selection—a point that directly undermines liberalism’s advocacy of unencumbered choice. The horizon is not something the individual creates through rational deliberation but rather the inherited cultural framework within which meaningful deliberation becomes possible.

Building upon this evaluative foundation, Taylor develops his concept of *webs of interlocution* to demonstrate how identity formation operates through ongoing dialogical engagement rather than individual self-discovery. This concept challenges the liberal assumption that the self is prior to and independent of its relationships:

This is the sense in which one cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding-and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call ‘webs of interlocution’.³²⁶

By using the term *webs*, Taylor emphasises the *relational* nature of selfhood—we are not individuals who subsequently choose to enter relationships, but rather beings whose very capacity for self-understanding emerges from relational contexts. We become who we are only through conversation, recognition, and response within communities of shared meanings and values, in other words, through shared conceptions about the good life. This idea challenges the liberal, and

³²⁵ Taylor, C., (2003). *The Ethics of Authenticity* (11th printing). Harvard University Press. p.50

³²⁶ Taylor, C. (2001). *Sources of the Self: The making of the modern identity* (10th printing). Harvard University Press. p. 36.

more specifically the Rawlsian assumption, that the self is prior to and independent of its ends and independent of conceptions of the good.

Ruth Abbey's analysis (2000) reinforces this insight by identifying how even liberal ideals depend on communal foundations:

The fact of belonging to a community or society takes pride of place in explaining political norms, values, and practices for Taylor. Certain goods and even conceptions of the self are only available to individuals by virtue of the culture to which they belong, and culture is not an accretion of individual choices but a shared, collective heritage that needs to be reproduced and transmitted.[...] Even the ideal of the individual taking a critical distance from society's values, customs, and traditions is only made possible and sustained by a culture that values and promotes critical reasoning and independent thinking.³²⁷

This analysis reveals that liberal individualism depends upon the very shared traditions it claims to transcend, creating what Abbey identifies as an essential contradiction within liberal theory itself:

The relational constitution of identity that Taylor describes through webs of interlocation cannot function in a moral vacuum; rather, it requires what he terms *moral spaces*—thick evaluative contexts that give content and direction to the ongoing process of self-interpretation. These moral spaces provide the substantive orientation required for meaningful selfhood, moving beyond abstract procedural frameworks toward engagement with questions of the good life. This conception of moral spaces addresses the problem of disorientation that afflicts individuals within liberal democracies who have lost access to shared moral frameworks.³²⁸ Without these frameworks, individuals cannot engage in what

³²⁷ Abbey, R. (2024). *Charles Taylor* (Second edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. p. 155. Originally published in 2000

³²⁸ Abbey (2024) provides a crucial analytical distinction, noting that while Taylor occasionally treats moral frameworks and strong evaluations as interchangeable concepts, moral frameworks are more accurately understood

Taylor calls *strong evaluations*—judgments that distinguish between higher and lower, noble and base ways of living. The self must exist within these moral spaces as a dialogical rather than isolated entity, embedded within rather than disengaged from cultural values and traditions.³²⁹

Taylor's philosophical concepts—*horizons of significance*, *webs of interlocution*, and *moral spaces*—collectively provide the hermeneutic architecture that demonstrates how dependence on external demands constitutes rather than constrains authentic existence. Each concept reveals a different dimension of human embeddedness while exposing the ontological impossibility of the atomised self.

This hermeneutic framework reveals the ontological foundations underlying communitarian critiques of liberal individualism. As Mulhall and Swift observe, this approach constitutes a communitarian understanding of selfhood and moral frameworks:

In addition, underlying and unifying these specific positions we can see in Taylor an essentially communitarian conception of moral frameworks of the self, but one which more closely resembles MacIntyre's than it does Sandel's. For in Taylor's view, any adequate conception of morality, of the self and its narrative unity, and of practical reasoning must acknowledge the foundational importance of moral frameworks or qualitative distinctions; and all such frameworks are essentially communal in nature: they can be established, maintained and acquired only through membership of a language community. This constitutes a profound attack upon asocial individualism, but an attack upon its philosophical rather than its substantive variants, since it amounts to criticising moral and political theories for ignoring or repressing the dependence of all conceptions of the good

as comprising multiple strong evaluations—specifically, hierarchical judgments about the relative significance of different goods within an individual's life (p. 96).

³²⁹ Taylor, C. (2001). *Sources of the Self: The making of the modern identity* (10th printing). Harvard University Press. pp. 26-27

and of the self upon social matrices rather than for ignoring or repressing the importance of conceptions of the good that are strongly communal in content. In this respect, Taylor's affinities are once again with MacIntyre rather than Sandel. And of course, this communitarian inflection in Taylor is in the last resort a consequence of his conception of the self. For human beings are self interpreting animals, and the linguistic and experiential resources for such self-interpretations are only to be found in the context of a community of other selves, then Taylor is committed to the view that community is a structural precondition of human agency and selfhood.³³⁰

Nevertheless, Taylor's critique of the atomism prominent in Western democracies does not seek to cancel liberalism's ideals altogether. Rather, his concern focuses on the lack of shared moral frameworks that could provide individuals with orientation within *horizons of significance*. His *dialogical* conception of selfhood offers not a rejection of individual agency but a more adequate understanding of how such agency emerges through embedded engagement with others within substantive moral contexts.

Through his hermeneutic analysis, Taylor contributes to the ontological transformation of the self that characterises communitarian thought alongside thinkers like Sandel and MacIntyre. His contribution lies in providing the theoretical architecture necessary for understanding how authentic selfhood emerges through situated engagement rather than abstract autonomy.

8.2 The Encumbered Self and Environmental Responsibility: Addressing Liberal Individualism's Environmental Limitations

The complementary critiques of Sandel, MacIntyre and Taylor which I discussed above converge on an essential reconceptualisation of moral agency and selfhood, that challenges the

³³⁰ Mulhall, S., & Swift, A. (1996). *Liberals and Communitarians* (Second Edition). Blackwell. pp. 121-122

atomistic conceptions of liberal environmental thought. Their synthesis reveals that the *encumbered self* emerges through three interconnected aspects: Sandel's constitutive relationality, MacIntyre's narrative embeddedness, and Taylor's dialogical formation. These concepts establish that environmental challenges cannot be adequately addressed if responsibility is grounded in individual preference aggregation or abstract moral reasoning.

Instead, environmental responsibility must arise from one's constitutive attachments to specific places, communities, stories and meaningful relationships. In that sense, Sandel's conception of constitutive attachments provides the ontological foundation by demonstrating that our moral identity is partially shaped by involuntary bonds to family, community, and place that precede individual choice. MacIntyre's narrative account adds the temporal dimension, showing how environmental virtues develop through participation in historically extended practices and traditions rooted in local landscapes and ecosystems. Taylor's dialogical self completes this framework by revealing how our capacity for environmental commitment develops through ongoing conversations within *webs of interlocution* that are themselves spatially and culturally situated.

This synthesis suggests that environmental responsibility is not something we choose to adopt but something we discover through recognising the constitutive relationships that already shape our identity. The environmental implications are significant: rather than beginning with abstract principles or individual preferences, environmental ethics must start with the concrete attachments and relationships that constitute our embedded existence.

The theoretical synthesis outlined above directly responds to the three critical environmental limitations of liberal individualism established in Chapter 7: the atomisation of environmental responsibility into individual lifestyle choices, the disconnection from territorial and place-based contexts, and the inadequate conception of responsibility. These deficiencies, stemming mainly from liberalism's ontological commitment to the unencumbered self, treat

environmental concern as a matter of personal preference, one among others. Such an approach misunderstands the nature of environmental responsibility, which actually emerges from constituted attachments that serve as the foundation for meaningful engagement with one's community and place.

The following analysis examines how each scholar's contribution—Sandel's constitutive attachments, MacIntyre's narrative embeddedness, and Taylor's dialogical formation—provides theoretical responses to these limitations, demonstrating how the encumbered self reconceptualises environmental responsibility as embedded, territorial, and lived rather than chosen.

8.2.1 Sandel's Constitutive Attachments :Environmental Application

Sandel's conception of the encumbered self challenges the atomisation of responsibility found in liberal approaches to environmental challenges by demonstrating the ontological impossibility of the unencumbered self. His relational understanding of identity provides the foundation for moving beyond individualistic frameworks that reduce environmental engagement to matters of personal preference and market choice. The encumbered self's identity emerges through involuntary bonds to family, community, and tradition that precede individual choice rather than being subject to it.³³¹ These constitutive attachments generate the constitutive ends which are moral purposes that are realised rather than chosen,. These in turn form the basis of our obligations to others who share our communities, values, and traditions.

This ontological shift from individual choice-based to realisation-based responsibility challenges the atomised conception that treats environmental concern as merely another sphere of individual preference. When environmental responsibility is grounded in constitutive attachments rather than autonomous choice, it transcends the limitations of market-orientated engagement.

³³¹ Sandel, M. J. (Ed.). (1984). *Liberalism and its critics*. New York University Press. pp. 172-175

Liberalism's emphasis on individual choice—even when expressed as sustainable consumption—maintains the primacy of personal preference over collective obligation. As Sandel argues, this approach undermines civic membership by treating shared environmental concerns as aggregated individual choices rather than as expressions of our constitutive relationships with communities and places.

The inadequacy of this atomised approach becomes particularly evident when environmental challenges are addressed through the green consumerism—selecting sustainable products while preserving the structure of individual choice within market relations.³³² This approach, while not inherently wrong, reflects what I termed in the previous chapter an *ethic of distraction* that diverts attention from the deeper moral foundations that should inform environmental responsibility. Sandel's encumbered self reveals the limitations of this approach by demonstrating that meaningful environmental engagement must emerge from our constitutive attachments rather than from calculations of personal benefit or preference satisfaction.

Moving beyond the atomisation of responsibility, Sandel's ideas addresses the territorial disconnection that characterises liberal approaches to environmental challenges. His understanding of constitutive attachments includes particular places and communities that form part of our moral identity; we cannot coherently separate ourselves from these spatial and cultural contexts because they are partly constitutive of who we are. Commenting on the inadequacies of cosmopolitanism, he states that:

If the nation cannot summon more than a minimal commonality, it is unlikely that the global community can do better, at least on its own. A more promising basis for a democratic

³³² For more on Green Consumerism see; EBSCO Research Starters. (n.d.). Green consumerism overview. *EBSCO Information Services*. Retrieved August 19, 2025, from <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/marketing/green-consumerism-overview>

politics that reaches beyond nations is a revitalized civic life nourished in the more particular communities we inhabit.³³³

This territorial embeddedness explains why we may have reason to care more for some people and less for others. Sandel argues that this is not due to a failure of impartial justice but as a recognition of the moral significance of particular relationships and places in constituting selfhood:

The global media and markets that shape our lives beckon us to a world beyond boundaries and belonging. But the civic resources we need to master these forces, or at least to contend with them, are still to be found in the places and stories, memories and meanings, incidents and identities, that situate us in the world and give our lives their moral particularity.³³⁴

For environmental ethics, this suggests that genuine care for nature begins with attachment to particular landscapes and places. The territorial dimension of Sandel's encumbered self thus challenges the liberal tendency to approach environmental problems through abstract, universalist frameworks that disconnect responsibility from place-based relationships and local ecological knowledge. This emphasis on particular attachments and connection to specific places provides the foundation for environmental stewardship that emerges from lived experiences and traditions rather than abstract obligation. The significance of these place-based attachments will be fully examined in the next chapter, where I undertake a detailed analysis of particular virtues in environmental stewardship, with special attention to Roger Scruton's concept of *oikophilia* as a foundational element of this approach.

The third limitation addressed by Sandel's framework concerns the reconceptualisation of responsibility itself. The encumbered self generates obligations that are not chosen based on

³³³ Sandel, M. J. (2022). *Democracy's discontent: A new edition for our perilous times*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. p.277. Originally published in 1996.

³³⁴ Sandel, M. J. (2022). *Democracy's discontent: A new edition for our perilous times*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. p.281

personal benefit but instead discovered as part of their constitutive identity through participation in communities and ongoing memberships—moral duties that arise from our constitutive attachments and that carry weight precisely because they reflect who we already are rather than what we decide to become. Environmental responsibility thus emerges from recognition of our embedded relationships with particular bonds we develop rather than from autonomous rational moral choice. This reconceptualisation moves beyond the liberalism's emphasis on voluntary action toward understanding environmental duty as an expression of our constituted identity within our communities.

The practical manifestations of these theoretical insights become evident in Sandel's analysis of contemporary environmental policy in *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (2012). He examines the consequences of applying market mechanisms in environmental contexts providing thus compelling empirical evidence for how liberal individualism's unencumbered self manifests in those environmental policy failures. His critique of tradable pollution permits exemplifies the atomistic logic he challenges:

The moral problem with a global market in pollution permits is different. Here, the issue is not bribery but the outsourcing of an obligation. It arises more acutely in a global setting than in a domestic one. Where global cooperation is at stake, allowing rich countries to avoid meaningful reductions in their own energy use by buying the right to pollute from others (or paying for programs that enable other countries to pollute less) does damage to two norms: it entrenches an instrumental attitude toward nature, and it undermines the spirit of shared sacrifice that may be necessary to create a global environmental ethic.³³⁵

³³⁵ Sandel, M. J. (2012). *What money can't buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. p.61. Sandel's reference to a "global environmental ethic" here should not be understood as advocating for cosmopolitan or universalist approaches that bypass particular communities. Rather, his communitarian framework suggests that global cooperation must be grounded in locally cultivated ethical commitments. The "shared sacrifice" he invokes requires communities to first develop robust environmental practices and civic responsibilities within their particular contexts. Only through such locally rooted moral formation can communities genuinely participate in global

This commodification reflects the deeper philosophical problem of the unencumbered self, which treats environmental relationships as external goods subject to market calculation rather than as constitutive elements of identity.

Carbon offset mechanisms reveal similar patterns of moral corruption through market logic. Sandel argues that these systems enable wealthy individuals and corporations to purchase moral absolution while maintaining environmentally destructive practices:

Carbon offsets reflect a laudable impulse: to put a price on the damage our energy use inflicts upon the planet, and to pay the price, person by person, of setting it right. Raising funds to support reforestation and clean energy projects in the developing world is certainly worthwhile. But offsets also pose a danger: that those who buy them will consider themselves absolved of any further responsibility for climate change. The risk is that carbon offsets will become, at least for some, a painless mechanism to buy our way out of the more fundamental changes in habits, attitudes, and ways of life that may be required to address the climate problem.³³⁶

This approach embodies the atomistic assumption that environmental responsibility can be discharged through individual market transactions rather than requiring fundamental changes to our constitutive relationships with natural and human communities. The encumbered self concept offers a meaningful response by recognising that our identities are partially constituted by our ecological relationships, making environmental degradation a form of self-degradation that cannot be offset through market mechanisms.

environmental cooperation, as the shared ethical foundation necessary for collective action emerges from situated practices rather than abstract universal principles. Sandel's concern is thus that market mechanisms undermine the very possibility of developing this foundation by allowing international mechanisms to avoid the transformative local engagement that genuine environmental ethics requires.

³³⁶ Sandel, M. J. (2012). *What money can't buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. p.63

Sandel's integration of moral and political philosophy with practical policy analysis in environmental contexts demonstrates how recognition of our embedded relationships with both human and natural communities provides the foundation for environmental responsibility that transcends market mechanisms and individual preference satisfaction. His work reveals the ontological incoherence of liberal atomism: the self cannot exist prior to its constitutive ends. The encumbered self thus offers not merely a critique of the limitations of liberal individualism in environmental inadequacies but a positive alternative grounded in the constitutive nature of our community and place-based relationships.

8.2.2 MacIntyre's Historical Embeddedness: A Critical Response to Liberal Individualism's Environmental Limitations

MacIntyre's idea of narratives and traditions as constitutive of one's identity challenges liberal individualism's approach to environmental problems. Rather than conceiving individuals as autonomous agents who subsequently choose their environmental commitments, he demonstrates that moral identity emerges through historical embeddedness—through narratives and living traditions:

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life. Once again the narrative phenomenon of embedding is crucial: the history of a practice in our time is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer history of the tradition through which the practice in its present form was conveyed to us; the history of each of our own lives is

generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a number of traditions.³³⁷

MacIntyre's insights, when extended to environmental concerns, pose a dual challenge to liberal approaches to environmental problems. First, they contest the liberal paradigm of atomised responsibility, demonstrating that environmental obligation cannot be understood as an external preference of autonomous agents, but rather as constitutive of moral identity itself. Within the liberal framework, where the self exists prior to its ends, the autonomous individual selects obligations in the same manner as personal goals, rendering environmental responsibility merely one option among many competing choices. This fragmentation of responsibility is fundamentally undermined by MacIntyre's concept of narrative embeddedness, which proves essential because it illuminates why environmental challenges demand the kind of historically extended commitment that individualistic approaches cannot generate or maintain. The inadequacy of liberalism's atomistic conception of selfhood lies in the absence of this temporal continuity necessary for meaningful environmental guardianship. MacIntyre's historical and intergenerational dimension demonstrates that authentic environmental concern requires sustained community engagement across generations with specific environmental conditions and practices.

Contemporary studies of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) systems provide compelling empirical support for MacIntyre's theoretical insights, demonstrating how environmental understanding develops through generational transmission rather than individual preference. Fikret Berkes (2012) in his work on TEK illustrates precisely this dynamic of tradition-embedded environmental knowledge. Berkes demonstrates that TEK emerges through continued intergenerational interactions between societies and ecosystems, where communities develop comprehensive knowledge-practice-belief complexes that operate across interconnected levels of

³³⁷ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. p.274

understanding.³³⁸ This complex operates across four interconnected levels: local empirical knowledge, resource management systems, social institutions, and underlying worldviews—each level sustaining and informing the others across generations. Essentially, Berkes emphasises that TEK functions as both substantive and dynamic process, encompassing not only what communities know but how this knowledge is continuously produced and applied.³³⁹ This dimension parallels MacIntyre’s understanding of living traditions as ongoing arguments about constitutive goods.

Second, MacIntyre’s reconceptualisation of tradition as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument” transcends the territorial disconnection of liberalism’s tendencies for abstract universalism. Applied to the environmental sphere, this framework reveals how ecological wisdom emerges through continued debates about environmental goods—debates that develop through direct engagement with particular landscapes while maintaining temporal coherence across generations. This approach addresses liberalism’s territorial disconnection precisely because tradition, as lived historical experience, inherently embeds communities within specific places. The historical dimension of tradition essentially connects practices and knowledge to particular locations, rather than abstract universalistic principles, creating ongoing debates about goods and practices. He argues:

Moreover when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose. So when an institution—a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital—is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or

338 Berkes, F. (2018). *Sacred ecology* (3rd ed) Routledge. pp. 8,19

339 Berkes, F. (2018). *Sacred ecology* (3rd ed) Routledge.p.8

what good farming is or what good medicine is. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict.³⁴⁰

MacIntyre's understanding of the farm as bearer of agricultural tradition exemplifies this territorial embeddedness without falling into narrow localism. The farm in question cannot be conceived as an abstract agricultural unit but rather as a specific place—this farm, embedded within this landscape, carrying forward particular traditions of stewardship that connect past, present, and future generations. Knowledge of good farming practices emerges through participation in ongoing arguments about agricultural goods within this concrete tradition. This understanding demonstrates how environmental wisdom develops not through detached theoretical principles but through constant engagement with specific ecological contexts and local communities that usually are tied to particular places, bearers of these traditions.³⁴¹

Berkes' research provides empirical validation of this territorial embeddedness as well. His documentation of TEK systems reveals how environmental knowledge is invariably place-specific, emerging through continuous interaction with particular ecosystems rather than abstract principles. Traditional communities demonstrate exactly the kind of territorially-grounded environmental engagement that MacIntyre's framework would predict. Berkes demonstrates how these communities possess sophisticated weather-related knowledge, consisting in environmental sensitivity and intuitive understanding of ecological signs of practical decision-making.³⁴² This embodied sensitivity to environmental change is only possible through historical embeddedness in specific places, rather than the abstract principles favoured by liberal approaches.

³⁴⁰ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. p.273

³⁴¹ While I acknowledge that many elements in MacIntyre's analysis and concepts that I discussed open important questions about intergenerational knowledge transmission and future generation justice—a central concern in environmental ethics—such considerations lie beyond the scope of the present research and won't be discussed here in further detail.

³⁴² Berkes, F. (2018). *Sacred ecology* (3rd ed) Routledge.p.180

Addressing the third limitation of liberal individualism's response to environmental challenges—the need for reconceptualising responsibility—MacIntyre's analysis of practices with internal goods demonstrates how moral obligations emerge through inherited participation in socially established activities rather than through individual rational choice alone.

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is.³⁴³

MacIntyre conceptualises practices as complex and intelligible forms of social activity that are collective and historically embedded. These practices transcend mere individual skills or voluntary interpersonal associations based on contractual relationships—arrangements that typify liberal conceptions of social activity. Instead, practices constitute socially established forms of meaningful engagement that require participation in shared traditions and adherence to communally developed standards of excellence:

For the goods internal to practices which cannot be achieved without the exercise of the virtues are not the ends pursued by particular individuals on particular occasions, but the excellences specific to those types of practices which one achieves or fails to achieve, moves toward or fails to move toward in virtue of the way in which one pursues one's particular

³⁴³ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. pp.234-235

ends or goals on particular occasions, excellences our conception of which changes over time as our goals are transformed.³⁴⁴

Engagement with the practices thus generates what MacIntyre terms “internal goods”. Those cannot be obtained through external means or individual pursuit alone. These goods function not as private possessions but as shared achievements that benefit the entire community of practitioners. The virtues provide the essential character traits necessary for achieving these internal goods through continued practice engagement. He notes that:

The importance therefore for beginning from practices in any consideration of the virtues is that the exercise of the virtues is not only worthwhile for its own sake—it turns out that you cannot be genuinely courageous or just or whatever without caring for those virtues for their own sake—but has further point and purpose, and indeed that it is in grasping that point and purpose that we characteristically initially came to value the virtues. Yet the virtues are not related to the goods which provide them with further point and purpose in the way in which a skill is related to the ends that its successful exercise procures or in the way in which a skill is related to those objects of our desire that its successful exercise may enable us to possess.³⁴⁵

Consequently, MacIntyre argues that virtues cannot be instrumentally deployed as mere tools; they must be pursued for their *own* sake while simultaneously contributing to the purpose of sustaining and extending those practices through which we come to understand the virtues’ inherent value.

³⁴⁴ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. p332

³⁴⁵ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. p332

The interconnected deployment of MacIntyre's concepts of practices, goods and virtues—where each element depends upon and reinforces the others—challenges liberal individualism's conception of responsibility in several critical ways.

First, it shows that responsibility emerges through inherited participation in socially established activities rather than voluntary rational choice. This suggests that moral obligations are constituted by the embeddedness in ongoing practices, not by autonomous individual decisions. Environmental responsibility, from this perspective, would arise from participation in practices of land stewardship, community care, or ecological knowledge rather than from abstract rational calculations such as individual carbon footprints.

Second, since internal goods can only be achieved collectively, responsibility becomes communal. The excellence of farming as a practice, as in MacIntyre's example, depends on the entire community of farmers working together to maintain and extend standards of excellence, ecological knowledge, and sustainable techniques. Individual farmers are less likely to achieve these through isolated action alone.

Third, MacIntyre notes that our conception of excellences changes over time as our goals are transformed. This suggests that environmental responsibility is not a fixed set of rules but an evolving understanding that emerges through ongoing meaningful engagement with ecological practices. Communities of practitioners continually refine their understanding of what constitutes excellent environmental stewardship.

Overall, MacIntyre's framework reveals that liberal individualism's environmental limitations emerge from conceiving the self and moral identity in atomistic, ahistorical terms that detach individuals from the inherited practices through which environmental responsibility develops. His approach suggests that effective environmental response requires recovery of embedded practical wisdom that emerges through sustained participation in place-based

activities. Such activities maintain ecological relationships across generations, creating forms of environmental knowledge and commitment that transcend individual lifespans. This historically grounded alternative demonstrates how environmental ethics can be reconstituted through community-based practices that integrate particular ecological knowledge with temporal continuity, providing a foundation for environmental governance models that emerge from local environmental understanding.

While MacIntyre's framework provides a substantive critique of liberal individualism's limitations and offers a compelling alternative grounded in historical embeddedness, the accelerating pace of environmental change may require innovative responses that transcend the temporal rhythms of traditional practice development. Contemporary ecological crises reveal the need for rapid environmental adaptation, thus presenting a challenge for virtue-based environmental approaches. This limitation does not diminish the significance of MacIntyre's theoretical contribution but rather highlights the complexity of developing environmental frameworks adequate to both the wisdom of inherited practices and the unprecedented nature of contemporary environmental challenges. Ostrom's institutional analysis of common pool resources, which I discussed in earlier chapters, bridges this gap between theoretical insights and empirical applications by demonstrating how individual self-interest can be transformed into individual capabilities that benefit entire communities. This transformation will be examined in detail in the thesis' concluding chapter.

8.2.3 Taylor's Dialogical Self: Relational Environmental Responsibility

Taylor's critique of atomism demonstrates how individualistic frameworks misinterpret environmental responsibility. The inadequacy of market-orientated environmental engagement lies mainly in the misunderstanding of human agency itself. This atomistic view treats environmental concern as a matter of preference, where individuals may or may not choose to

follow. Taylor's dialogical self reveals that environmental concern develops through ongoing relationships with both human communities and place-based environments.

In other words, the free individual or autonomous moral agent can only achieve and maintain his identity in a certain type of culture. [...] I am arguing that the free individual of the West is only what he is by virtue of the whole society and civilisation which brought him to be and which nourishes him; [...] I want to claim finally that all this creates a significant obligation to belong for whoever would affirm the value of this freedom; this includes all those who want to assert rights either to this freedom or for its sake.³⁴⁶

Abbey underlines the significance of this claim for Taylor's critique of liberal atomism, arguing that his insistence on the culturally constituted self reveals that even the ideal of moral autonomy presupposes the sustaining background of particular social and historical forms of life.³⁴⁷

Just as shared practices, values, and traditions constitute individual identity and moral agency within human communities, an environmental ethos should constitute our capacity for sustainable engagement with the natural world. The natural world cannot be sustained through isolated individual consumer choices precisely because our environmental understanding and responsibilities are formed through and better understood by the community's shared practices.

Therefore, as we possess constitutive identities, this in turn generates constitutive obligations regarding environmental responsibility. Environmental goods emerge through participation in collective cultural practices, and affirming these goods necessarily entails obligations to sustain the social conditions of their possibility—just as affirming goods like

³⁴⁶ Taylor, C. (1992). Atomism. In S. Avineri & A. de-Shalit (Eds.), *Communitarianism and individualism* (pp. 29–50). Oxford University Press. pp.44-46

³⁴⁷ Abbey, R. (2024). *Charles Taylor* (Second edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. p. 155

individual freedom requires sustaining the societal conditions that enable such freedom.³⁴⁸ This moves beyond treating environmental protection as instrumental to individual satisfaction, toward recognising environmental responsibility as constitutive of the cultural conditions within which meaningful individual engagement becomes possible.

Hence, Taylor's critique of atomism directly addresses liberalism's first limitation, the atomisation of environmental responsibility, by demonstrating that environmental obligations emerge from our dialogical formation with 'significant others' and place-based communities, rather than from autonomous individual choice. This renders environmental responsibility a necessary rather than optional dimension of moral agency.³⁴⁹

The dialogical constitution of environmental responsibility reveals a deeper structural requirement: if environmental concern develops through relational formation, then these formative relationships must be grounded in particular territorial contexts that provide substantive content for environmental evaluation. This connection between dialogical formation and territorial positioning addresses liberalism's second limitation—the abstraction of environmental concern from place-based contexts.

Taylor's concept of moral frameworks as providing orientation in *moral space* demonstrates how meaningful environmental engagement depends on territorially embedded frameworks that provide *moral orientation* through particular places and landscapes. Taylor's spatial metaphor of *horizons of significance* is not merely illustrative but identifies an essential requirement of moral agency: just as individuals "orient themselves in physical space and find it hard to function if disoriented," moral disorientation similarly occurs when individuals are abstracted from the

³⁴⁸ On environmental goods and services definitions, see European Commission, Eurostat, "Environmental Goods and Services Sector (EGSS)," [accessed 27/08/2025], [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Environmental_goods_and_services_sector_\(EGSS\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Environmental_goods_and_services_sector_(EGSS))

³⁴⁹ The term *significant others* is used by Taylor when he points out the relational nature of human identity formation, arguing that this emerges through ongoing dialogical relationships with others who shape our moral understanding (Taylor, 1989, p. 36; as discussed in Abbey, 2024, p. 81)

frameworks that provide evaluative reference points. This spatial dimension of *moral orientation* reveals the inadequacy of liberal environmental approaches, which treat environmental concern as territorially neutral, generating moral disorientation by severing the spatial relationships through which environmental goods become apprehensible as meaningful. When environmental responsibility is abstracted from place-based contexts, individuals lose access to the territorial frameworks that make environmental strong evaluations possible. Abbey's analysis of Taylor's *moral orientation* explicitly connects this spatial requirement to environmental movements. As she notes:

[...]Taylor uses the metaphors of frameworks or horizons interchangeably when conveying his conviction that they are indispensable because they orient people in moral space. One's framework provides guidance about moral questions in the broad sense, about what it is right to do vis-à-vis others and about what it is good to be, about what is meaningful and rewarding for a particular individual. Moral frameworks help to answer these questions even if those living within them are unaware of their role in guiding their moral lives. [...] We can also think of some secular movements as providing moral frameworks, Marxism, feminism, and environmentalism for example. Again, although there is room for debate about what allegiance to such a perspective requires morally, it is not hard to understand that such allegiances construct a moral framework for individuals to live, or to try to live, by.³⁵⁰

While Abbey notes that secular movements like environmentalism can provide moral frameworks, Taylor's insight about these frameworks giving shape and meaning to individuals' lives suggests that environmental frameworks operate more fundamentally than ideological positions that individuals might adopt. Environmental frameworks cannot be conceived as

³⁵⁰ Abbey, R. (2024). *Charles Taylor* (Second edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. pp.95-96

abstract ideological movements, as typically understood in liberal contexts. Instead, they necessarily develop through sustained engagement with particular ecosystems and communities rather than through abstract principles or universal commitments. This place-based development is crucial for environmental evaluation. The capacity to distinguish between ecological flourishing and degradation, to understand environmental relationships as qualitatively higher or lower, emerges through place-based moral education—extended engagement with specific landscapes that develops evaluative competence regarding environmental goods. This territorial dimension of environmental frameworks reveals why liberal approaches that attempt to generate environmental concern independent of spatial context essentially misinterpret the nature of environmental engagement itself.

Taylor's concept of *horizons of significance* provides the theoretical bridge between moral orientation and territorial connection. Environmental responsibility emerges from the basic structure of moral orientation itself, which requires territorial positioning within landscapes and communities that provide the evaluative horizons, the frameworks of meaning, through which environmental relationships become recognisable as goods, rather than mere resources or abstract concerns. This understanding addresses territorial disconnection by revealing that environmental engagement requires ongoing place-based relationships that constitute, rather than merely inform, moral frameworks. *Moral orientation* necessitates territorial positioning within contexts that provide the *horizons of significance* necessary for environmental strong evaluations to acquire experiential meaning and ethical weight. Without this territorial grounding, environmental goods remain abstract principles rather than lived moral realities.

Liberal approaches fail because they attempt to generate environmental concern independent of the place-based frameworks that make environmental goods recognisable as intrinsically valuable rather than instrumentally useful. When individuals are abstracted from territorial contexts through increased mobility or consumer-mediated relationships with nature,

they lose access to the place-based frameworks through which environmental *moral orientation* develops and is sustained. This abstraction transforms what should be constitutive moral relationships into optional consumer preferences—exactly the reduction that Taylor’s critique of atomism reveals as inadequate for genuine environmental responsibility. The result is the misconception of the relational and territorial conditions that make environmental concern possible in the first place.

The third and final limitation of liberalism’s response to environmental challenges is addressed by Taylor’s concept of *strong evaluations*. This concept provides the missing evaluative dimension that explains why environmental responsibility cannot be adequately understood through liberal approaches of voluntary obligation. Taylor’s *strong evaluations* reveal the qualitative moral structure through which these duties are apprehended and sustained. Strong evaluations involve qualitative distinctions between higher and lower feelings, actions, and ways of life. For Taylor, agents do not simply have a set of desires that stand on the same level; rather, they experience some desires and ways of living as more admirable, more meaningful, or more worthy than others, and it is this hierarchical ordering that gives their lives moral shape.³⁵¹ As Abbey emphasises this means that individuals already inhabit a moral landscape in which their projects and attachments are lived as qualitatively ranked: some goods come to matter more deeply and to feel more significant to them.³⁵²

When applied to environmental contexts, this framework reveals that our relationships with the natural world are not matters of neutral preference but involve immediate qualitative concerns of degradation or flourishing, exploitation or care, withdrawal or reciprocity. This qualitative dimension fundamentally challenges liberalism’s reduction of environmental concern to preference satisfaction. Environmental goods such as biodiversity, climate stability, and ecosystem

³⁵¹ Taylor, C. (2001). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity* (10th printing). Harvard University Press. pp. 29-30 (Original work published in 1989)

³⁵² Abbey, R. (2024). *Charles Taylor* (Second edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. pp.96-97

viability are not merely instrumental preferences that individuals might rationally choose to pursue, but objects of strong evaluation that carry inherent qualitative worth. When individuals recognise environmental degradation as problematic or ecosystem protection as noble, they are engaging in the sort of qualitative discrimination that Taylor identifies as fundamental to moral agency itself. This recognition provides the evaluative framework through which environmental responsibility is discovered rather than chosen.

However, Abbey clarifies that Taylor's distinction does not mean that individuals always make choices by consciously engaging strong evaluations. As she explains:

For example, whether I take the train or the car to work might just depend on what mode of transport is more convenient in light of the weather or my other plans that day. [...] Yet such quotidian decisions can become the subject of strong evaluation. As public transport generates fewer carbon emissions, my choice of transport could become part of my moral identity as someone who cares about climate change. [...] So while Taylor is not proposing that strong evaluation comes into play in every decision an individual makes, nothing precludes certain things from moving into the zone of strong evaluation and coming to be seen as involving distinctions between higher and lower, better and worse, ways to live.³⁵³

This insight reveals that environmental distinctions often operate at a level of unawareness, remaining unarticulated yet morally operative. Abbey further clarifies this crucial point:

Ultimately, while individuals can be conscious of the moral judgements that underpin their strong evaluations, they need not be. Strongly valued goods need not be explicit or articulated in order to exercise a powerful influence on a person's actions and sense of morality. Instead, they can exist as part of the tacit background of their understanding.³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Abbey, R. (2024). *Charles Taylor* (Second edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. p. 97

³⁵⁴ Abbey, R. (2024). *Charles Taylor* (Second edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. p. 99

This understanding transforms how we conceive environmental responsibility, which often functions as part of the implicit background of moral understanding rather than as the outcome of explicit deliberation. Abbey's clarification is particularly significant for understanding why environmental obligation cannot be adequately captured through liberal approaches that require individuals to articulate and justify their environmental commitments through rational choice frameworks. By placing emphasis on the rational autonomous individual and their capacity for choice, such frameworks fail to acknowledge the moral structures operating in the background. Consider how individuals experience immediate moral repulsion when confronted with environmental destruction or find deep satisfaction in ecological restoration—these responses engage strong evaluation that precedes and grounds explicit environmental choices. This implicit environmental consciousness reflects what Taylor identifies as the capacity to apprehend *qualitative distinctions* that “are central to our moral thinking and ineradicable from it.” The liberal emphasis on articulated environmental choice therefore misunderstands genuine environmental moral experience, which involves more than deliberative preference: it requires acknowledgement of the qualitative distinctions that operate beneath conscious awareness.

Through Taylor's analysis of the self, environmental responsibility emerges from the qualitative moral structure of human agency rather than from external considerations of utility or duty. Environmental obligation becomes not something we choose to embrace but a dimension of strong evaluation constitutive of moral agency itself. This reconceptualisation of responsibility moves beyond liberal approaches that treat environmental concern as a preference among others, revealing instead that environmental responsibility reflects the basic evaluative structure through which moral agents conceive and respond to their constitutive relationships with the natural world.

8.2.4 Concluding Remarks on Liberal Individualism's Limitations in Environmental Challenges

The convergent insights from Sandel, MacIntyre, and Taylor establish a comprehensive alternative to liberal individualism's approach to environmental challenges, revealing how each scholar's contribution addresses the limitations identified in the previous chapter. Their synthesised account of the encumbered self directly challenges the atomistic premise underlying liberal approaches to environmental problems by demonstrating that environmental responsibility cannot be reduced to individual preference aggregation or market-oriented solutions. Sandel's constitutive attachments reveal that environmental obligations emerge from relationships that precede and constitute individual identity rather than external preferences subject to rational calculation. MacIntyre's narrative embeddedness demonstrates that environmental stewardship develops through historically extended practices within particular communities rather than through isolated individual decisions. Taylor's dialogical formation shows that environmental commitment emerges through ongoing conversations within *webs of interlocution*, where moral sources and frameworks of meaning develop collectively rather than through solitary deliberation. Together, these three dimensions of the *encumbered* self provide the conceptual foundation for reimagining environmental responsibility as relational.

Where liberal environmentalism assumes that individuals can step back from their particular attachments to adopt impartial concern for environmental goods, the *encumbered* self reveals this detachment as both impossible and undesirable. Environmental commitment emerges not from transcending our particular relationships but from deepening our understanding of how these relationships extend into the natural world. This synthesis addresses the first limitation of liberal individualism—the atomisation of environmental responsibility—by revealing that meaningful environmental engagement must be grounded in constitutive relationships rather than voluntary choice. The encumbered self demonstrates that we are environmentally responsible

beings not because we choose to care about the environment but because our identity is partially constituted by our relationships with particular places and ecosystems.

The territorial dimension of this synthesis addresses liberalism's second limitation by revealing how genuine environmental responsibility emerges from place-based embeddedness rather than abstract universalist principles. Sandel's emphasis on constitutive attachments includes particular places and communities that form part of our moral identity, showing that territorial relationships are constitutive rather than optional. MacIntyre's account of practices demonstrates how environmental virtues develop through sustained engagement with particular landscapes and inherited traditions rather than through abstract environmental principles. Taylor's concept of moral frameworks reveals that environmental strong evaluations require territorial positioning within contexts that provide *the horizons of significance* necessary for environmental goods to become recognisable as intrinsically valuable. This place-based approach avoids both the abstraction of universal environmental principles and the narrowness of purely local concern by grounding environmental commitment in lived experience of particular landscapes while recognising their connections to wider ecological relationships.

The reconceptualisation of responsibility itself constitutes perhaps the most significant contribution of this theoretical synthesis. Rather than conceiving environmental obligations as constraints that autonomous individuals choose to accept, the encumbered self reveals environmental responsibility as constitutive of moral identity itself. Sandel's constitutive attachments generate discovered obligations that carry moral weight precisely because they reflect who we already are rather than what we decide to become. MacIntyre's practice-based framework shows how environmental responsibility emerges through inherited participation in socially established activities rather than voluntary rational choice. Taylor's strong evaluations demonstrate that environmental duties arise from the qualitative moral structure of human agency rather than external considerations of utility or preference satisfaction. This understanding moves

beyond liberal approaches to reveal environmental obligation as emerging from moral agency itself rather than from external imperatives.

This reconceptualisation carries profound implications for environmental governance and policy. Rather than relying primarily on individual behavioural change or market-based incentives that treat environmental concern as optional preference, environmental approaches must focus on strengthening the constitutive relationships between communities and places that generate environmental commitment. Environmental education becomes a process of helping people recognise and deepen existing relationships rather than persuading them to adopt new values. Policy makers must acknowledge that environmental responsibility emerges from particular contexts and relationships rather than universal principles, suggesting the need for more contextualised approaches to environmental governance that respect the diversity of ways in which environmental commitment develops across different places and traditions.

However, establishing the theoretical necessity of constitutive relationships raises an equally important practical question: within what concrete contexts do such relationships develop and sustain themselves? The situated self cannot exist in theoretical abstraction—it requires actual communities of practice where constitutive attachments can be cultivated, narrative identities can be formed through shared traditions, and dialogical identity formation can occur through ongoing conversation with significant others.

This recognition points toward the need to examine how the situated self finds its natural expression within constitutive communities—those place-connected localities where environmental responsibility develops not as abstract principle but as lived practice embedded within particular histories, cultures, and relationships.

8.3 Community and the Situated Self: Identity Formation and Moral Development

8.3.1 The Constitutive Nature of Community: Beyond Liberal Instrumentalism

The ontological shift from the atomised to the situated self through the lenses of Sandel, MacIntyre, and Taylor reveals an essential insight: individual flourishing cannot be conceived apart from the whole of which one is constitutively a part. This recognition necessitates examining how the situated self actually develops and realises its embeddedness—not in abstract theoretical terms, but through concrete participation in moral communities. The individual can only achieve authentic self-understanding and his place within the whole through engagement with the specific places, traditions, and relationships that provide the narrative context for identity formation. This understanding challenges liberalism's tendency toward universal communities of abstract individuals—such as global networks of environmental activists united by shared principles but disconnected from particular places and narratives. Instead, the situated self requires constitutive communities: those place-connected memberships where specific histories, cultures, and values intersect to create the dialogical context necessary for character development and moral reasoning.

Sandel, MacIntyre, and Taylor each provide complementary perspectives on community's role in identity formation, unified by their shared understanding of community as fundamentally *constitutive* rather than merely instrumental or voluntary. This constitutive conception contrasts liberal individualism's treatment of community as an external association that individuals may choose to join or leave whenever they decide to.

For Sandel, this constitutive dimension operates at the deepest level of selfhood, shaping not merely what individuals *have* as members, but who they *are* as persons. As he articulates::

On this strong view, to say that the members of a society are bound by a sense of community is not simply to say that a great many of them profess communitarian sentiments and pursue communitarian aims, but rather that they conceive their identity- the subject and not

just the object of their feelings and aspirations- as defined to some extent by the community of which they are a part. For them, community describes not just what they have as fellow citizens but also what they are, not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity. In contrast to the instrumental and sentimental conceptions of community, we might describe this strong view as the constitutive conception.³⁵⁵

This understanding reveals community as involving membership through active participation, connection with specific places, shared values among members, and crucially, common purposes that bind the collective together. Rather than representing an external good to be selected by autonomous individuals, community carries inherent moral weight precisely because it constitutes identity itself. According to Sandel, we do not select our communities in the manner we might choose a professional association or interest group. Instead, we find ourselves embedded within particular traditions, languages, and places that shape our capacity for moral reasoning before we can consciously evaluate them. These communities are “always already present”—they constitute the very framework within which meaningful choice becomes possible, providing the narrative and cultural resources necessary for both self-understanding and moral deliberation.

MacIntyre advances a parallel yet distinct understanding of community’s constitutive role, one that explicitly grounds virtue development within particular social contexts. While his conception of community does not operate in a narrow place-based manner, it nevertheless advocates for community in constitutive terms that challenge liberal universalism. His critique centres on the recognition that virtues cannot be cultivated in abstractly but require the concrete narrative frameworks that only specific communities can provide. For MacIntyre, the constitutive

³⁵⁵ Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press.p.150

nature of community becomes evident through his analysis of the “heroic self”—a virtuous identity found in heroic societies such as ancient Greek, medieval, or Renaissance cultures, where moral education unfolds through shared narratives and collective practices. He demonstrates this constitutive relationship by arguing that:

Identity in heroic society involves particularity and accountability. I am answerable for doing or failing to do what anyone who occupies my role owes to others and this accountability terminates only with death. I have until my death to do what I have to do. Moreover this accountability is particular. It is to, for and with specific individuals that I must do what I ought, and it is to these same and other individuals, members of the same local community, that I am accountable. The heroic self does not itself aspire to universality even although in retrospect we may recognize universal worth in the achievements of that self.³⁵⁶

This passage reveals how identity formation operates through particularity and accountability within specific community contexts. The heroic self derives moral coherence not from universal principles but from concrete relationships and role-based obligations within local communities. MacIntyre makes this constitutive understanding even more explicit when he distinguishes his position from contemporary communitarianism:

I see no value in community as such—many types of community are nastily oppressive and the values of community, as understood by the American spokespersons of contemporary communitarianism, such as Amitai Etzioni, are compatible with and supportive of the values of the liberalism that I reject. My own critique of liberalism derives from a judgment that the best type of human life, that in which the tradition of the virtues is most adequately embodied, is lived by those engaged in constructing and sustaining forms of community

³⁵⁶ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. p165

directed towards the shared achievement of those common goods without which the ultimate human good cannot be achieved.³⁵⁷

His conception thus excludes liberal universal conceptions such as global environmental communities or abstract networks of shared principles. Large nation-states and transnational movements lack the moral coherence necessary for developing shared understandings of virtue and the good life, a confusion that extends to environmental challenges where abstract calls for global citizenship often fail to generate concrete commitments necessary for ecological responsibility. MacIntyre's notion of communities is instead characterised by proximity and particularity—they are historical vehicles that carry the narratives and moral contexts essential for virtue cultivation. When individuals participate authentically in such communities, virtues develop naturally through shared practices directed toward common goods that cannot be achieved through individual effort alone.

Finally, Taylor's interpretation completes this constitutive framework by emphasising that community is essential for shaping identity and transmitting values, norms, and traditions across generations. He demonstrates how the free individual or autonomous moral agent can only achieve and maintain identity within specific cultural contexts:

In other words, the free individual or autonomous moral agent can only achieve and maintain his identity in a certain type of culture, some of whose facets and activities I have briefly referred to. But these and others of the same significance don't come into existence spontaneously each successive instant. They are carried on in institutions and associations

³⁵⁷ MacIntyre, A. C. (2011). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed). Bloomsbury. p16. While MacIntyre's wholesale rejection of liberalism is clear, my intention in this thesis is to adopt a more balanced position: communitarianism understood as a corrective rather than a complete rejection of liberal thought. Certain liberal commitments—such as individual rights, autonomy, and critical reflection—remain valuable, but they can only be meaningful and effective for individuals and societies when founded and exercised within the context of constitutive communities. What MacIntyre fundamentally challenges, and what this thesis endorses, is not community *as such*, but rather the specific notion of *constitutive* community: communities that shape human identity through shared narratives and practices, where members pursue *common goods* essential to their flourishing.

which require stability and continuity and frequently also support from society as a whole almost always the moral support of being commonly recognized as important but frequently also considerable material support. These bearers of our culture include museums, symphony orchestras, universities, laboratories, political parties, law courts, representative assemblies, newspapers, publishing houses, television stations, and so on.³⁵⁸

Taylor exposes liberalism's paradox of autonomy: the very capacities that rights-based arguments seek to protect—such as moral autonomy and rational deliberation—cannot develop outside the social contexts that liberal theory treats as secondary. He argues that individual freedom presupposes memberships and attachments that cannot themselves be chosen by isolated individuals. As he articulates:

Thus the thesis just sketched about the social conditions of freedom is based on the notion, first, that developed freedom requires a certain understanding of self, one in which the aspirations to autonomy and self-direction become conceivable; and second, that this self-understanding is not something we can sustain on our own, but that our identity is always partly defined in conversation with others or through the common understanding which underlies the practices of our society. The thesis is that the identity of the autonomous, self-determining individual requires a social matrix, one for instance which through a series of practices recognizes the right to autonomous decision and which calls for the individual having a voice in deliberation about public action.³⁵⁹

For Taylor, this social matrix does not constrain individual development but rather enables it. Community possesses intrinsic value precisely because it constitutes the precondition for moral autonomy itself. Humans are not self-sufficient beings who subsequently choose to associate;

³⁵⁸ Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in Alkis Kontos, ed., *Powers, Possessions and Freedoms: Essays in Honor of C.B. Macpherson*. University of Toronto Press, 197. p.56

³⁵⁹ Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in Alkis Kontos, ed., *Powers, Possessions and Freedoms: Essays in Honor of C.B. Macpherson*. University of Toronto Press, 197. p.60

rather, human capacities develop through membership and participation within social contexts that provide both the conceptual resources and institutional frameworks necessary for moral reasoning.

The understanding of individual development within social contexts notably resonates with Mill's conception of *individuality*, which I discussed in detail in an earlier chapter of the thesis. Despite Mill's utilitarian tendencies, his notion of individuality approximates an Aristotelian understanding of human excellence, as Levi (1959) demonstrates.³⁶⁰ For Mill, individuality means discovering oneself, but this discovery never occurs in isolation from social context. Rather, the social situation within which one finds oneself enables or constrains development, providing opportunities to make changes and challenge established ideas when problematic. Donner (2018) further suggests that Mill's notion of individuality possesses an inherently social dimension because individuals develop neither in isolation nor detachment from the social matrix, but with conscious awareness of their embeddedness.³⁶¹ This awareness indicates that individuals are positioned within, not external to, communities with their relationships, cultures, traditions, and values. While individuals may critically evaluate these contexts, they do not develop independently of them. Essentially, this embedded individuality enables precisely what Taylor describes: the capacity for autonomous decision-making and deliberative participation in public action. The individual who understands their social formation can meaningfully contribute to collective deliberation, not despite their embeddedness, but because of the critical capabilities that such embeddedness makes possible.

This conception directly challenges liberalism's assumptions about human nature and social organisation. Taylor rightly identifies this contradiction in liberal thought: while liberalism

³⁶⁰ Levi, A. W. (1959). *The Value of Freedom: Mill's Liberty* (1859-1959). *Ethics*, 70(1), 37–46.

³⁶¹ Donner, W. (2018). *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Theory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press p.148

champions individual autonomy, it fails to comprehend the constitutive role that community membership plays in developing the very capacities it seeks to protect. As he explains:

According to this outlook [atomist modes of thought], there are individuals, who have inclinations and goals and life plans. These inclinations include affection for others, which may be mutual and hence bring about bonding. Families and friendships thus find a place. But beyond these, common institutional structures have to be understood as in the nature of collective instruments. Political societies in the understanding of Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, or the twentieth century common sense that they have helped shape are established by collections of individuals to obtain benefits through common action that they could not secure individually. The action is collective, but the point of it remains individual. The common good is constituted out of individual goods, without remainder. This construal of society incorporates the atomist component of Sen's "welfarism" that I have already mentioned.³⁶²

By demonstrating that "action is collective but the point of it remains individual," Taylor reveals how liberalism reduces all social bonds beyond immediate personal affection to contractual arrangements designed for mutual benefit. This instrumentalist understanding treats memberships as voluntary associations that carry no inherent moral weight, where participants need not share common values, purposes, or ultimate ends. This is problematic because such associations remain fundamentally utilitarian, serving the purpose of mutual advantage rather than constituting relationships that contribute intrinsically to identity formation and character development.

This insight reinforces Taylor's argument about community's intrinsic value. Community matters not merely because it serves individual purposes, but because it constitutes the kinds of

³⁶² Taylor, C. (1989). Cross-purposes: The liberal-communitarian debate. In N. L. Rosenblum (Ed.), *Liberalism and the moral life* (pp. 159-182). Harvard University Press. p.166

beings capable of having purposes worth serving. The communitarian critique thus extends beyond individual-level concerns to encompass how we understand community itself. While liberalism conceives communities as voluntary associations—instrumental arrangements that individuals enter to pursue pre-given preferences—the communitarian framework recognises community's constitutive role in forming the individual identity and foundational capacities that liberalism presupposes.

The implications of this constitutive understanding extend directly to environmental responsibility. Unlike liberal environmentalism's reliance on abstract global citizenship or universal moral principles, the communitarian framework recognises that environmental care emerges most powerfully through particular attachments to specific places, relationships, and ways of life. The individual embedded within constitutive community understands the fundamental interdependence between human flourishing and the environment. Environmental problems become not abstract global challenges but concrete threats to the particular places, relationships, and cultural practices that provide meaning and identity.

Nevertheless, this constitutive understanding raises a critical question: if communities are indeed constitutive of individual identity, how deep does this embeddedness extend? Is individual autonomy fundamentally at risk? Critics of communitarianism often assume that emphasis on community necessarily threatens individual autonomy and moral agency. This criticism reflects liberalism's tendency to conceive individual and community as zero-sum competitors—where more community necessarily means less individual freedom, and vice versa.

Empirical research on social capital and environmental behaviour supports this theoretical insight. Communities characterised by strong social networks, shared norms, and institutional mechanisms for collective action consistently demonstrate higher levels of environmental stewardship than communities marked by individualistic competition and weak social ties. The stability of social fabric correlates directly with environmental responsibility because individuals

understand themselves as accountable to ongoing relationships that depend upon ecological health.³⁶³

This theoretical foundation raises the crucial question: if communities are indeed constitutive of individual identity and moral capacity, how do such communities actually function as sites of character development and virtue cultivation? How do the particular places, relationships, and shared practices that constitute identity translate into the concrete moral formation necessary for environmental responsibility? The answer lies in understanding community not merely as a constitutive framework, but as an active moral laboratory where environmental virtue is developed through ongoing participation in shared practices directed toward common goods.

8.3.2 Community as Moral Laboratory: The Foundation for Character Development

The term *moral laboratory* was first introduced by anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (2014) in her work on moral imagination and everyday ethical practice, particularly within her broader framework of “first person virtue ethics”. For Mattingly, a moral laboratory constitutes:

[..] a metaphorical realm in which experiments are conducted in all kinds of places and where participants are neither mere objects of study nor entities in some cyborgic system but rather researchers or experimenters of their own lives.³⁶⁴

Mattingly’s original concept focuses primarily on individual and familial moral experimentation within institutional contexts such as hospitals, therapy sessions, and homes. Her

³⁶³ Detailed empirical evidence supporting the relationship between social capital and environmental stewardship will be examined in the final chapter of this thesis, which analyses civic environmentalism initiatives and community-based environmental projects to demonstrate how this theoretical framework manifests in practice, thereby concluding the thesis with concrete validation of the communitarian approach to environmental responsibility.

³⁶⁴ Mattingly, C. (2014). *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. University of California Press.p.16

research explores how individuals navigate moral dilemmas through everyday life circumstances, especially under conditions of constraint and chronic suffering. This embodied engagement with particular circumstances and relationships allows individuals to develop an ethical understanding and realise moral goods.

While Mattingly's insight proves valuable for understanding personal moral development, there is significant potential for expansion to address the role of community in character formation that communitarian approaches emphasise. Building on the situated self analysis developed earlier, I argue that communities function as moral laboratories precisely because they provide the constitutive relationships and shared practices through which moral character develops. This expanded understanding of community as moral laboratory addresses a number of limitations in liberal approaches to individual moral development.

This community-centred approach moves beyond the liberal assumption of the self as prior to its ends, which was discussed earlier. Individual moral development and character formation do not occur independently of one's community and relationships with significant others. Rather, moral character emerges through sustained participation in the shared practices and constitutive relationships that communities provide. Furthermore, community as moral laboratory provides institutional mechanisms through which individuals develop the understanding necessary for navigating complex moral challenges and dilemmas. Liberals tend to favour the neutrality of the state regarding to moral questions, dismissing them from the public sphere and isolating them within the private sphere of individual life. However, community provides the essential context for cultivating public civic life, and consequently civic responsibility.

This occurs through the essential institutional mechanisms that communities offer, such as town meetings, neighbourhood organisations, local civic groups, where individuals learn to express their concerns, listen to diverse perspectives, and negotiate conflicts over competing values. This relational engagement serves multiple interconnected functions in developing moral

responsibility. Initially, it creates opportunities for individuals to discover how their personal concerns connect with broader social challenges, enabling them to understand the relational dimensions of problems that might otherwise appear purely private. Moreover, community discussion exposes participants to the full complexity of moral questions in ways that abstract information cannot, requiring them to understand how different values intersect in particular circumstances and helping them to make decisions without dismissing ethical considerations. Most significantly, this community engagement develops civic responsibility through ongoing relationships with others who share common purposes and values. Unlike abstract, universal faceless communities, local civic organisations create face-to-face relationships where individuals understand their commitments and can follow through on collective decisions.

Although virtue development can be conceived as an individualistic framework, the conception of community as moral laboratory recognises that virtue cultivation requires not just individual effort but an ongoing participation and commitment in communities of shared values and purposes that can sustain and develop moral character over time. This represents an interactive relationship between the individual and the community. Consider how community organisations cultivate the character traits necessary for civic engagement: patience for democratic procedures, attentiveness of diverse perspectives, willingness to subordinate personal preference to collective deliberation, and capacity for collaboration across conflict. These virtues cannot be developed individually through private reflection; they require Taylor's *webs of interlocation*, which is an ongoing conversation with significant others who share commitments to civic goods and can hold individuals accountable to their stated values. The institutional mechanisms of community organisations create the social conditions within which such virtues can develop and flourish.

This analysis of community as moral laboratory reveals why liberal individualism proves inadequate for addressing environmental challenges. Individual environmental responsibility requires more than autonomous moral reasoning or voluntary association with like-minded

others. It demands the kind of character development and practical wisdom that emerges only through sustained engagement within constitutive communities. Such communities provide what isolated individuals cannot: shared languages for moral reasoning, institutional mechanisms for individual and collective action, ongoing accountability relationships, and deep knowledge of particular places and ecological relationships. They enable the development of environmental virtues, not as abstract moral principles but as cultivated capacities for living well within one's community and their surroundings.

This understanding points toward the necessity of examining more closely how specific virtues develop through community participation and how such virtues might address the environmental challenges that liberalism's abstract universalism cannot adequately meet. The cultivation of environmental virtues within moral communities represents not a retreat from universal environmental concerns but their necessary foundation in particular places and relationships where such concerns can gain concrete meaning and sustained commitment. The following chapter will explore this foundation through an analysis of civic environmental virtues, *phronēsis* and *oikophilia* in particular, and their empirical manifestations in community-based environmental governance.

Chapter 9

Towards a Civic Virtue Environmentalism

9.1 Theoretical Frameworks in Environmental Ethics: Limitations and the Need for Alternatives

The environmental crises of the twenty-first century—from global warming and biodiversity loss to pollution and resource depletion—have exposed important limitations in how contemporary societies understand and respond to environmental challenges. Political and policy responses have increased, from international climate agreements to market-based environmental mechanisms, such as geoengineering and green energy solutions. Yet these interventions fail to address the underlying conditions of environmental degradation. This inadequacy reflects the deeper theoretical problems within the dominant liberal individualist and market-oriented framework that shape both environmental policy and environmental ethics.

The field of environmental ethics encompasses an extensive terminological landscape—nature, environment, land, territory, natural world, human entities, non-human entities, non-living entities, ecosystems, biodiversity and so on—each carrying specific theoretical weight and normative implications. Rather than attempting comprehensive definition of this entire conceptual apparatus, I focus here on terms central to my argument, beginning with the distinction between *environment* and *nature*:

What is the environment? In one sense the answer is obvious. The environment is those special places that we are concerned to protect: the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, the Lake District in Great Britain. But the environment is more than these special places. It is also Harlem and Brixton, as well as the Upper East Side of Manhattan and the leafy suburbs of Melbourne. It is even the strip malls

of Southern California. The environment includes not just the natural environment, but also the built environment.³⁶⁵

This understanding of the environment by Dale Jamieson (2008) recognises that environmental challenges are not confined to remote natural spaces but pervade all human settings and require moral frameworks capable of addressing the full spectrum of human-environment interactions. The terminology itself requires careful distinction. The word environment in English can be quite vague when it comes to meanings—one can use it to describe the environment they grew up in, meaning their household, or in scientific descriptions describing laboratory conditions. It should be noted that the Greek word for environment, *περιβάλλον*, means surroundings, and it is in this meaning that I use the word environment.³⁶⁶ Nature on the other hand, the Greek word for which is *φύσις*, may refer to the natural capacities of an object or a person, the natural world and its natural laws, and birth.³⁶⁷

Furthermore, as Christopher Schlottmann (2017) explains:

The English word “nature” comes from the Latin word *natura*, which in turn is a translation of the Greek word *physis*. *Natura* in its oldest uses means “birth.” We hear the echo of this when people speak of “Mother Nature” or nature as the source of all life. When we speak of nature, we often mean to be referring to what is essential, as when we talk of “human nature.” Sometimes nature is thought to be irresistible (“it’s in his nature”), other times as

³⁶⁵ Jamieson, D. (2008). *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*. Cambridge Univ. Press. p.1

³⁶⁶ *περιβάλλον* [periválon]: the totality of conditions and factors within which someone or something is created, exists and develops. 1. the totality of natural conditions and factors that influence living organisms: 2a. the totality of social conditions and factors that influence humans: b. the persons with whom someone associates, who constitute their social circle: their friends, colleagues etc.
[etymology: neutral middle voice < ancient Greek translated in English “environment”], https://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/modern_greek/tools/lexica/triantafyllides/search.html?q=περιβάλλον&dq=, [accessed 26/09/2025]

³⁶⁷ [1] Nature (φύσις), [physis], A. 1. Physical or intellectual properties of a thing, person, or group of individuals, which exist from birth or are the result of complete development and maturation | external appearance, stature | character | as synecdoche with qualifying adjective the person who has this or that character 2. gender/sex, B. 1. Genesis, creation, birth 2. nature, the laws that govern creation 3. as generative force | philosophy 4. all of creation, the universe | philosophy | creature of creation, human or animal
C. | philosophy 1. primordial substance 2. definition of | ARISTOTLE, , https://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/ancient_greek/tools/lexicon/lemma.html?id=191, [accessed 26/09/2025]

something to be overcome (when it takes the form of disease), and other times still it is regarded as good (“natural ingredients”). While environmentalists do not always endorse what they take to be natural, there is a tendency in environmental thought to think of nature as providing a norm or ideal that is at least presumptively good. While there is more to environmentalism than respecting nature, investigating the idea of nature is a good place to begin our understanding of environment and society.³⁶⁸

This etymological distinction is important for understanding how environmental virtues must operate within the actual contexts of community life, περιβάλλον, rather than in abstract relationship to pristine nature, φύσις. Having established this conceptual foundation, a definition of environmental ethics then can be as follows:

Environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents.³⁶⁹

Understanding environmental ethics in these terms reveals how the field emerged as a philosophical response to the extensive environmental degradation characterising contemporary societies. Given that such destruction is predominantly anthropogenic in origin, early environmental ethics scholarship adopted an anthropocentric orientation, examining humanity's moral obligations toward the natural world and the instrumental value of environmental protection for human welfare. The field has since expanded beyond this human-centred framework to encompass broader moral considerations, including animal rights, ecosystem integrity, and the intrinsic value of natural entities.³⁷⁰ Yet despite this theoretical diversification,

³⁶⁸ Schlottmann, C. (Ed.). (2017). *Environment and society: A reader*. New York University Press. p.3

³⁶⁹ Brennan, Andrew and Norva Y. S. Lo, "Environmental Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/ethics-environmental/>>. [accessed 26/09/25]

³⁷⁰ While environmental ethics encompasses diverse theoretical approaches—including meta-ethics, normative ethics, deep ecology, the land ethic, and sentientism—this study focuses specifically on normative ethical theories, as my research focuses on virtue-based environmental ethics.

the dominant approaches to environmental ethics remain embedded within frameworks that inadequately address the complex dimensions of environmental responsibility.

Contemporary environmental ethics encompasses multiple normative approaches, including consequentialist frameworks that evaluate environmental actions based on their outcomes and welfare maximisation, and deontological approaches that emphasise duties, rights, and intrinsic value in nature. While each offers analytical insights, both ultimately reduce environmental responsibility to either utilitarian calculation or rights-based individualism, framing environmental problems as discrete choices by autonomous agents.

Environmental virtue ethics offers a potentially transformative alternative to these limitations, focusing on character traits and moral development rather than rules or consequences. A virtue-based environmental ethics asks not merely what environmental actions are required, but what kinds of persons we should become in relation to the natural world. It focuses on questions of character, excellence, and human flourishing rather than on rules or outcomes. Within environmental ethics specifically, this approach has gained traction for several reasons: it offers foundations for environmental protection grounded in human well-being and flourishing; it appeals to enlightened self-interest alongside altruism; and it provides a framework for specifying the character traits necessary for creating sustainable societies.³⁷¹

Building on this foundation, Dale Jamieson (2014) advances this discussion by proposing that individuals must develop what he terms *green virtues* to minimise their negative contributions to contemporary environmental crises. He categorises these virtues into three types:

We can think of green virtues as falling into three categories: those that reflect existing values; those that draw on existing values but have additional or somewhat different

³⁷¹ Cafaro, P. (2015). Environmental virtue ethics. In M. Slote & L. Besser-Jones (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (pp. 427-444). Routledge.p.427

content; and those that reflect new values. I call these three categories preservation, rehabilitation, and creation.³⁷²

While Jamieson's concept provides valuable insight into how virtue ethics can be applied to environmental contexts, especially through his notion of green virtues, it risks according to Remi Beau (2023) reinforcing the human-centred and individualistic characterisation often attributed to virtue ethics more broadly.³⁷³ Other critics of environmental virtue ethics question whether this framework can adequately respond to environmental challenges or properly recognise the moral status of non-human entities. Holmes Rolston III (2005) argues that environmental virtue ethics commits a fundamental error by subordinating nature's intrinsic value to human moral development. According to Rolston the world existed long before humanity emerged, and thus nature's value cannot be properly understood as derivative of human virtue or character excellence. From this temporal perspective, environmental virtue ethics appears to commit a category error by making natural systems instrumentally valuable for human moral development rather than recognising their independent moral standing. Rolston's critique thus suggests that virtue ethics approaches inevitably reduce environmental ethics to a form of sophisticated anthropocentrism, where the natural world becomes valuable primarily as a context for human flourishing rather than due to its intrinsic value.³⁷⁴

Rosalind Hursthouse (2007) attempts to counter this critique by defending virtue environmental ethics and demonstrating that it is actually utilitarian and deontological environmental ethics—with their reliance on concepts like intrinsic value—that tend toward

³⁷² Jamieson, D. (2014). *Reason in a dark time: Why the struggle against climate change failed--and what it means for our future*. Oxford University Press. p. 212

³⁷³ Beau, R. (2023). The ecological community: The blind spot of environmental virtue ethics. *Philosophies*, 8, 112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8060112>. My civic environmental virtue framework directly addresses this individualistic tendency by grounding virtue development within constitutive communities and their ecological contexts. This approach ensures that environmental virtues remain accountable to both human communities and their surrounding ecological systems, rather than being reduced to individual character traits divorced from place and collective practice.

³⁷⁴ Rolston, H. (2005). Environmental virtue ethics: Half the truth but dangerous as a whole. In R. Sandler & P. Cafaro (Eds.), *Environmental virtue ethics* (pp. 61-78). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

individualism and anthropocentrism in counterproductive ways. She argues that reconfiguring traditional virtues such as prudence, compassion, and humility within environmental contexts, while introducing new virtues capable of capturing what environmental ethicists like Paul Taylor (1986) describe as “wonder for nature” and “being rightly oriented to nature,” might mitigate the anthropocentrism attributed to virtue ethics. Though she acknowledges that the current environmental predicament may render complete environmental virtue impossible in practice, her framework provides a realistic foundation for virtuous environmental character formation and education.³⁷⁵

In this chapter I build upon Hursthouse’s framework and extend the case for environmental virtue ethics by arguing for specifically *civic environmental virtues* that develop through constitutive community relationships rather than individual moral reflection. This approach addresses environmental challenges not through abstract moral principles or aggregated individual choices, but through the cultivation of character traits that enable communities to flourish within their particular environmental contexts. Unlike purely individual environmental virtues, civic environmental virtues are inherently relational, developing through shared practices, place-based knowledge, and ongoing accountability relationships that embed environmental responsibility within community life.³⁷⁶

My approach differs from existing environmental ethics as it focuses on individual environmental responsibility that stems from virtue cultivation within communities. While animal rights or future generations rights remain important ethical questions in the environmental debate,

³⁷⁵ Hursthouse, R (2007) . (n.d.). Environmental Virtue Ethics. In Walker & P. Ivanhoe (Eds), *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (pp. 155–172). Oxford University Press.

³⁷⁶ While in my thesis I employ the concept of “civic environmentalism,” it is worth noting that Özgüç Orhan (2008) identifies two related but contextually distinct scholarly movements that converge on similar theoretical foundations: *civic environmentalism*, predominantly developed within US environmental policy debates and emphasising decentralised, community-based participatory solutions; and *environmental citizenship* discourse, emerging primarily in Canadian, British, and Australian scholarship and emphasising systematic theorisation of civic duty and ecological responsibility. Both movements, according to Orhan, share Aristotelian commitments to the common good and civic virtue as essential to environmental transformation. My argument draws on insights from both traditions.

my focus here concerns how individual environmental responsibility can be grounded in character and community. I contrast this with approaches that reduce responsibility to individual lifestyle choices functioning as market-oriented solutions—choices that often fail to reduce consumption or challenge the commodification of natural resources. My *civic environmental virtue* approach connects the political with the moral without separating them, examining the consequences of *possessive individualism* and the conception of freedom as economic freedom for environmental degradation. Environmental problems cannot be solved through individual market choices alone but require the institutional mechanisms that communities, as I have developed them through the thesis as *constitutive*, provide for developing environmental character and capability.

My argument in this final chapter proceeds through three stages that bring together the theoretical framework which I developed throughout this thesis with empirical analysis of community-based environmental governance. First, I examine how particular virtues of *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) and *oikophilia* (love of place), address limitations in both individual and institutional approaches to environmental responsibility. These virtues emerge through community deliberation and place-based engagement, transforming abstract environmental concerns into concrete practices of care for particular places. *Phronēsis*, reconceptualised for environmental contexts, enables communities to deliberate effectively about complex environmental challenges while balancing multiple values and interests. *Oikophilia* grounds environmental care in particular place relationships that generate long-term commitment and detailed environmental knowledge.

Second, I demonstrate how these theoretical insights find empirical validation in community-based environmental governance, drawing on Ostrom's analysis of common pool resource management and William Shutkin's (1993) documentation of *civic environmentalism* in American communities. These cases illustrate how environmental care occurs through institutional mechanisms that strengthen community-place relationships rather than through centralised

regulation or abstract individual choice. Ostrom's work, which I discussed in detail in previous chapters, reveals how self-governing communities develop sustainable resource management practices that can transform individual self-interest into individual capabilities, benefiting the whole community, while Shutkin's civic environmentalism demonstrates how enhanced civic life with its participatory governance processes can generate environmental improvement.

Finally, I argue that civic virtue environmentalism—understood as the cultivation of environmental virtues in situated selves through constitutive community relationships—provides a response to the limitations of liberal individualist approaches to environmental challenges. This alternative does not reject the importance of individual environmental responsibility but locates such responsibility within the community contexts that make sustained environmental commitment possible. Nor does it dismiss the ongoing work and collaboration on a global level in order to find solutions. I argue however, that environmental policy as a matter of institutional design must support virtue development through strengthened community-place relationships and mechanisms, rather than relying primarily on changing individual preferences or market incentives. This civic dimension transcends the liberal distinction between private environmental preference and public environmental policy, making environmental responsibility a shared practice through which communities discover and fulfil their constitutive obligations to the places and ecosystems that sustain them.

9.2 Foundational Civic Environmental Virtues: Phronēsis and Oikophilia

Having identified the gaps in existing environmental virtue approaches and established the need for civic environmental virtues that develop through community relationships rather than individual moral reflection, I now turn to examining two environmental virtues that address these limitations: *phronēsis* and *oikophilia*. While environmental virtue ethicists have recognised the importance of prudence and care in environmental contexts, their arguments usually operate within frameworks that focus on personal character development and discrete moral choices that

promote human flourishing. My reconceptualisation *situates* these virtues within civic contexts, demonstrating how *phronēsis* operates through community deliberation about shared environmental challenges, and how *oikophilia* emerges from constitutive place-based relationships rather than abstract attachment to nature.³⁷⁷ Together, these virtues provide the character foundation necessary for communities to develop sustainable environmental practices that integrate environmental responsibility with human flourishing. As discussed in the preceding chapter, community serves as the moral laboratory where both the need for such virtues becomes apparent and the institutional mechanisms for their cultivation are provided.

9.2.1 Phronēsis: Human Flourishing and Environmental Citizenship

Aristotle's moral philosophy is presented primarily through his three works—the *Great Ethics*, the *Eudemian Ethics*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*—with the latter constituting the most influential and the foundation of what is commonly termed *virtue ethics*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses, among other ideas, the concept and significance of virtue (*aretē*), which he defines as those dispositions of the soul deserving praise. He distinguishes between two fundamental categories of virtue: the intellectual (*dianoētikai*) and the moral or ethical (*ēthikai*).

Now virtue also is differentiated in correspondence with this division of the soul. Some forms of virtue are called intellectual virtues, others moral virtues: Wisdom or intelligence and Prudence are intellectual, Liberality and Temperance are moral virtues. When describing a man's moral character we do not say that he is wise or intelligent, but gentle or temperate; but a wise man also is praised for his disposition, and praiseworthy dispositions we term virtues.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷Virtue ethics approaches that focus solely on individual human flourishing risk replicating the very abstraction I have criticised in liberal environmental theory. Just as liberalism appeals to abstract universal principles and generalised calls for environmental action, virtue ethics that focuses on individual character development may similarly detach environmental virtues from the concrete, place-based relationships and community contexts through which they are actually cultivated and exercised.

³⁷⁸ Aristoteles. (2007). *Aristotle: The Nicomachean ethics. With an Engl. Transl. By H. Rackham* (H. Rackham, Trans.; Repr. [d. Ausg.] 1934). Harvard Univ. Press. p 99

Intellectual virtue, Aristotle argues, originates from and develops through instruction; it requires experience and time to cultivate. Ethical virtue, by contrast, emerges from continuous habituation and practice—a distinction reflected etymologically in the derivation of *ēthikē* (ethical) from *ethos* (habit).

Virtue being, as we have seen, of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue is for the most part both produced and increased by instruction and therefore requires experience and time; whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit (*ethos*), and has indeed derived its name, with a slight variation of form, from that word.³⁷⁹

Within the domain of intellectual virtues, he identifies *sophia* (wisdom) and *phronēsis* (practical wisdom or prudence). *Sophia* represents theoretical wisdom—the highest intellectual virtue concerned with contemplation of eternal truths. *Phronēsis*, by contrast, is oriented toward practical reasoning and action in the realm of human affairs.³⁸⁰ He provides a definition of *phronēsis* as follows:

We may arrive at a definition of Prudence by considering who are the persons whom we call prudent. Now it is held to be the mark of a prudent man to be able to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for himself, not in some one department, for instance what is good for his health or strength, but what is advantageous as a means to the good life in general. This is proved by the fact that we also speak of people as prudent or wise in some particular thing, when they calculate well with a view to attaining some particular end of value (other than those ends which are the object of an art); so that the prudent man in general will be the man who is good at deliberating in general.³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ Aristoteles. (2007). *Aristotle: The Nicomachean ethics. With an Engl. Transl. By H. Rackham* (H. Rackham, Trans.; Repr. [d. Ausg.] 1934). Harvard Univ. Press.p.103

³⁸⁰ *Phronēsis* or prudence is usually translated and referred to in texts as practical wisdom

³⁸¹ Aristoteles. (2007). *Aristotle: The Nicomachean ethics. With an Engl. Transl. By H. Rackham* (H. Rackham, Trans.; Repr. [d. Ausg.] 1934). Harvard Univ. Press.p.369

For Aristotle, *phronēsis* represents the intellectual virtue that enables individuals to deliberate effectively about what conduces to living a good life. The *phronimos*—the person possessing this trait of practical wisdom—demonstrates the capacity to discern the appropriate course of action in particular circumstances, navigating the complexities of ethical life with sound judgment and deliberative excellence. However, a critical objection emerges: if *phronēsis* focuses on enabling individuals to deliberate about their own good life, does this not reduce environmental virtue to self-interested calculation? As Rolston argues:

Environmental virtues, as achieved by humans, will initially involve concern for human quality of life. But our deeper ethical achievement needs to focus on values as intrinsic achievements in wild nature. These virtues within us need to attend to values without us.³⁸²

Nevertheless, *phronēsis* is not as individualistic as it appears, but rather an intellectual virtue fundamentally oriented toward *eudaimonia* (human flourishing). Aristotle explicitly states that virtue makes the end right, practical wisdom the things leading to it, establishing thus practical wisdom as essential for actualising the virtuous activity that constitutes human flourishing.³⁸³ Yet the significance of *phronēsis* extends beyond individual orientation, for Aristotle conceives *eudaimonia* as achievable only within the context of the *polis*—the political community. To understand why this communal dimension resolves the apparent individualism of *phronēsis*, one must turn to Aristotle's claim that the polis is not merely a mechanism for securing survival but a constitutive precondition for human flourishing. His assertion that "man is by nature a political animal" establishes this essential relationality.³⁸⁴

This grounding of practical wisdom in communal deliberation reflects a broader recovery of Aristotelian philosophy in contemporary environmental thought. As Orhan (2008) argues, both

³⁸² Rolston, H. (2005). Environmental virtue ethics: Half the truth but dangerous as a whole. In R. Sandler & P. Cafaro (Eds.), *Environmental virtue ethics* (pp. 61-78). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. p.69

³⁸³ Aristoteles. (2007). *Aristotle: The Nicomachean ethics. With an Engl. Transl. By H. Rackham* (H. Rackham, Trans.; Repr. [d. Ausg.] 1934). Harvard Univ. Press.p.399

³⁸⁴ Aristotle. (1984). *Politics* (B. Jowett, Trans.). In J. Barnes (Ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Vol. 2). Princeton University Press.p.1987

civic environmentalism and environmental citizenship movements draw from Aristotle's conception of political association oriented toward common good, where political community itself constitutes the precondition for flourishing.³⁸⁵

The *phronimos* thus, does not deliberate in isolation but rather exercises practical wisdom in relation to the *common good* and shared purposes. Human beings cannot achieve their distinctive excellence—their *ergon* or proper function—apart from participation in a community that provides the meanings, traditions, and collective purposes constitutive of flourishing. This orientation of *phronēsis* towards a common good challenges interpretations that reduce virtue ethics to an individualistic or narrowly anthropocentric framework. The *phronimos* recognises that individual well-being is inextricably linked to the flourishing of the community, including the *place* one inhabits and the environment that sustains collective life. When practical wisdom is exercised within constitutive communities its cultivation necessarily encompasses concern for the material and environmental conditions that enable common flourishing. Such communities characterised by shared traditions, values, and purposes that constitute rather than merely serve individual identity. The prudent person understands that human flourishing cannot be realised if the community deteriorates, and that the community cannot flourish if the environment upon which it depends is degraded or destroyed.

The reconceptualisation of *phronēsis* as an environmental virtue builds upon this community-oriented foundation while extending its deliberative scope to encompass explicitly the environmental dimensions of community life. If the prudent individual understands that human flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of the community, and if communities exist for the sake of living well rather than merely living, then practical wisdom must address the environmental conditions that enable or constrain community's *eudaimonia*. This is not an

³⁸⁵ Orhan, Ö. (2008). The Civic Environmental Approach. *The Good Society*, 17(2), 38–43.

instrumental calculation wherein environmental protection serves independently defined human purposes. Rather, it reflects a deeper recognition that the environment constitutes, and not merely supports, the common contexts within which human flourishing becomes possible.

Hanne Laceulle (2018) supports this claim by emphasising how virtues develop through habituation within communities that transmit ethical practices across generations. In her analysis she demonstrates how the development of virtuous character dispositions presupposes social embedding:

Aristotle's philosophy teaches us that the individual striving for self-realization is interwoven with the good of the community – in Aristotle's case, the Greek polis. It thus has a moral relevance transcending the interests of the individual. This underscores that self-realization is not an atomistic undertaking. Instead, practicing the virtues has the potential of influencing the broader social and societal context of individual life.³⁸⁶

The cultivation of *phronēsis* as environmental virtue similarly requires communities that provide the practices, narratives, and deliberative spaces through which individuals learn to perceive their environments as constitutive *of* rather than external to flourishing.

This raises an important question: does the common good always align with individual good? The cultivation of *phronēsis* alongside other civic virtues addresses this potential tension between individual and common good precisely because the *phronimos* can identify that apparent conflicts often reflect distorted conceptions of flourishing—conceptions rooted in the atomistic assumptions of contemporary market societies. In such contexts, genuine communities—characterised by membership, shared traditions, common values, and a sense of common good—become increasingly rare.

³⁸⁶ Laceulle, H. (2018). Virtue. In *Aging and self-realization: Cultural narratives about later life* (pp. 223–224). Transcript Verlag. Pp. 223-224

Phronēsis as an environmental virtue can only be cultivated within such constitutive communities, where membership entails genuine participation in collective deliberation about the good life. The prudent individual understands that if the community flourishes—including the place where members live and the environment sustaining communal life—then individual flourishing becomes more attainable. Does this framework remain anthropocentric? Not if we understand that *phronēsis* functions by cultivating practical wisdom that renders the environment constitutive of communal purposes, not merely instrumental to pre-defined ends. An instrumental relationship treats the environment as external to human good; by contrast, a constitutive understanding recognises that human purposes, meanings, and possibilities for flourishing are shaped by and inseparable from environmental contexts.

Community deliberation serves as practical wisdom in action, providing the context wherein individuals learn to discern what genuinely contributes to the community's well-being. The prudent individual within a constitutive community understands that if the community flourishes—including the *place* where members live as the environment sustaining communal life—then individual flourishing becomes more attainable. This recognition extends to understanding the environment itself as *integral* to community purposes rather than merely a resource to be taken advantage of or a backdrop for human activities.

The *phronimos* who has developed environmental practical wisdom does not view care for the environment as sacrifice or external obligation. Rather, such an individual recognises that flourishing, both personal and common, emerges through understanding oneself as embedded in community and place. As Laceulle observes:

Instead, what is right or good should be context-dependent, and perceived as constantly negotiated and reflected upon in a hermeneutic, dialogical process. This hermeneutic process should either take place between moral agents or through self-reflection and internal dialogue within moral agents themselves. The understanding of virtue should

acknowledge the moral value of individuality, while remaining aware of the fact that this individual is socially embedded. By insisting on the moral primacy of the individual, the deeper roots of the liberal spirit that gave rise to modern interpretations of self-realization are given their proper acknowledgment. At the same time, a virtue interpretation that acknowledges the moral value of individuality still remains able to criticize – in line with MacIntyre (1984) – liberalism’s modern aberrations.³⁸⁷

This understanding of *phronēsis* as a socially embedded, contextually perceptive, and affectively engaged virtue has found resonance in scholarship that engages with questions of environmental governance and citizenship within the green and civic republican tradition.

Building on Barry's (1999) green republican framework and drawing on Aristotelian theory, Bohn (2021) argues that informal deliberative citizen participation processes dealing with sustainability issues ought to foster *phronēsis* as a form of what she calls “green political judgement formation” (GPJF).

[...] On the basis of this argument, I delineate concrete adaptations of the original Aristotelian concept and outline initial ideas for an updated version of *phronesis* that I refer to as ‘green’ political judgement formation.³⁸⁸

Her argument begins, significantly, from a diagnosis that closely parallels the one advanced throughout this thesis: that liberalism, with its methodological individualism and emphasis on the separateness of selves, constitutes a structural obstacle to the kind of civic participation oriented toward the common good that environmental responsibility requires.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁷ Laceulle, H. (2018). Virtue. In *Aging and self-realization: Cultural narratives about later life* (pp. 223–224). Transcript Verlag. p. 245

³⁸⁸ Bohn, C. (2021). Preference transformation through ‘green political judgement formation’? Rethinking informal deliberative citizen participation processes. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24(5), 761–778. p.765

³⁸⁹ Bohn, C. (2021). Preference transformation through ‘green political judgement formation’? Rethinking informal deliberative citizen participation processes. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24(5), 761–778. p.763,771

Against this background, she argues that deliberation alone is insufficient and that participation processes must be designed to cultivate *phronēsis* — understood not merely as a cognitive capacity but as a politically and emotionally embodied virtue — in order to enable genuine transformation of individual preferences rather than their mere aggregation.³⁹⁰

Bohn's formulation of GPJF identifies seven core elements of Aristotelian *phronēsis* that sustainability-oriented participation processes ought to incorporate. These include addressing participants in their role as citizens rather than consumers; incorporating the three steps of deliberation, decision-making, and action; orienting the process toward *eudaimonia* understood as the ecological common good; dividing responsibilities appropriately between citizens and state actors; fostering the intrinsic motivation of participants; appreciating participants' practical knowledge of local circumstances; and integrating emotions and empathy into the participation process.³⁹¹ Bohn's explicit inclusion of practical local knowledge (element 6) and emotional-empathetic engagement (element 7) as core elements of *phronēsis* is particularly significant for the argument of this thesis.

On the first point, she argues that participation processes must capture and value participants' practical knowledge of their city's specific circumstances alongside expert knowledge, in order to arrive at the situation-appropriate decisions that GPJF pursues.³⁹²

This resonates directly with the argument I develop in Chapter 6 concerning Ostrom's account of common-pool resource governance, where the practical, locally situated knowledge of communities proved indispensable to sustainable collective management — confirming that the

³⁹⁰ Bohn, C. (2021). Preference transformation through 'green political judgement formation'? Rethinking informal deliberative citizen participation processes. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24(5), 761–778. pp. 765-767

³⁹¹ Bohn, C. (2021). Preference transformation through 'green political judgement formation'? Rethinking informal deliberative citizen participation processes. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24(5), 761–778. pp. 772

³⁹² Bohn, C. (2021). Preference transformation through 'green political judgement formation'? Rethinking informal deliberative citizen participation processes. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24(5), 761–778. pp. 774-775

governance of environmental challenges and the governance of the commons share a common dependence on the kind of place-specific practical reasoning that this thesis identifies as central to *civic virtue environmentalism*.

On the second point, Bohn argues that *phronēsis* requires the integration of desire — as intrinsic motivation — and empathy — as the capacity to adopt the perspectives of others — as elements without which deliberation cannot achieve genuine preference transformation. As she summarises in her definition of GPJF:

GPJF treats individuals with heterogeneous backgrounds as fellow citizens of a specific municipal community. It aims at realising the 'ecological common good' of a larger moral community, including all present and future generations [...]. Moreover, they must encourage participants to critically reflect on their perspectives (including preferences), paying special attention to the way that they affect others and influence the possible realization of an 'ecological common good'. This requires an empathetic perspective exchange and supports a transformation of individual preferences.³⁹³

This green republican engagement with *phronēsis* converges with the argument developed in this thesis in several important respects. Both recognise the inadequacy of preference-aggregating approaches to environmental responsibility and identify *phronēsis* as the appropriate form of practical reasoning for civic engagement with shared environmental challenges. Both locate *phronēsis* within a broader commitment to the ecological common good rather than individual interest. And both insist that emotional engagement is not incidental but constitutive of genuine environmental practical wisdom. However, the account of *phronēsis* advanced in this thesis extends Bohn's formulation in two philosophically significant and original ways.

³⁹³ Bohn, C. (2021). Preference transformation through 'green political judgement formation'? Rethinking informal deliberative citizen participation processes. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24(5), 761–778. p.774

The first concerns the ontological grounding of *phronēsis*. Bohn's approach addresses *phronēsis* primarily as a deliberative capacity to be cultivated through appropriately designed participation processes — that is, at the level of institutional design. This thesis grounds *phronēsis* at a deeper level: in the ontology of the situated self as developed in Chapter 8. *Phronēsis* is not only a capacity that well-designed processes can foster; it is a virtue formed through habitual participation in constitutive communities, shaped by the narrative, historical, and place-based embeddedness that MacIntyre, Sandel, and Taylor illuminate. This distinction has practical consequences. Bohn herself observes that in her empirical examination of six sustainability-oriented participation processes, intrinsic motivation — element 5 of her framework, and the affective foundation without which genuine preference transformation cannot occur — was the only core element that was not implemented in any of the processes examined. She attributes this gap to the absence of appropriate institutional mechanisms. This thesis proposes a different diagnosis: intrinsic motivation cannot be generated by institutional design alone, because its source lies not in procedural arrangements but in the affective character of the *situated* self, in the attachments and loyalties that constitute identity and render the common good something genuinely cared for rather than merely acknowledged. The institutional conditions Bohn rightly identifies are necessary but not sufficient; what is also required is the kind of moral character that only the situated self, cultivated within constitutive communities, can provide.

The second and most distinctive extension concerns the affective and place-based dimension of environmental practical wisdom. Bohn explicitly identifies the integration of emotions and empathy as a core element of GPJF, and she is herself correcting a prior account — Trachtenberg's (2010) treatment of green political judgement — that omitted this emotional dimension.³⁹⁴ Yet while Bohn recognises emotion and intrinsic motivation as necessary to

³⁹⁴ Bohn, C. (2021). Preference transformation through 'green political judgement formation'? Rethinking informal deliberative citizen participation processes. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24(5), 761–778. p.764,767

phronēsis, she does not identify or theorise the virtue that would supply them. She also explicitly addresses the spatial dimension of phronēsis:

The adapted version of phronesis needs to negotiate sustainability-related topics at the local level so as to account for the embeddedness of our (political) actions within a greater spatial context and to reveal their relation to issues at a global scale.³⁹⁵

Yet again, she frames this spatial embeddedness as an institutional and scalar challenge rather than as a virtue rooted in constitutive attachment to particular places. This is precisely the gap that *oikophilia* fills. The love of home — understood not as sentiment but as a constitutive disposition toward the particular places, communities, and natural environments that form the context of one's civic life — provides the affective and territorial foundation without which phronēsis risks becoming, as Bohn's own empirical findings suggest, a well-theorised capacity that participation processes consistently fail to motivate. Oikophilia supplies what Bohn's framework requires but does not provide: the virtue that generates the intrinsic motivation she identifies as indispensable, grounds it in particular places rather than leaving it as an abstract orientation toward a distant ecological common good, and ensures that environmental phronēsis remains emotionally invested in the concrete communities and landscapes that make the common good something lived rather than merely deliberated. It is the mutual reinforcement of practical wisdom and love of home — phronēsis and oikophilia — that constitutes the specific and original contribution of civic virtue environmentalism to this debate.

Nevertheless, Bohn's account of phronēsis as a virtue embodied in civic participation processes has considerable value as an illustration of what such practical wisdom looks like in action, even if the present account grounds it more deeply than procedural design alone can achieve. While the argument advanced in this thesis holds that phronēsis is cultivated through the

³⁹⁵ Bohn, C. (2021). Preference transformation through 'green political judgement formation'? Rethinking informal deliberative citizen participation processes. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24(5), 761–778. p.774

ontology of the situated self and constitutive community rather than generated by institutional arrangements, the participatory initiatives Bohn examines — including "Planning for Real" and "World Café" processes deployed across Europe — provide concrete evidence that the deliberative and environmental dimensions of civic practical wisdom can and do emerge when communities are given the conditions to reason together about their shared places.³⁹⁶

The Hurst Farm, Matlock project, undertaken by Derbyshire Dales District Council in partnership with the local Hurst Farm Steering Group and the Friends of Hurst Farm, illustrates this convergence with particular clarity. Using the Planning for Real methodology, the project engaged residents, council officers, and local agency staff in a structured two-phase process of community deliberation and action planning centred on the regeneration of the estate. Significantly, when residents were invited to identify what mattered most to them, environmental concerns — the quality of green spaces, their maintenance, and the estate's woodland — emerged as among the three dominant priorities, generating a substantial share of all responses. This civic deliberation did not remain abstract: the process produced a shared Vision for Hurst Farm whose environmental outcomes included the creation of a natural woodland play area, the establishment of a Forest School supporting nature-based learning, and the development of a Heritage Trail connecting existing footpaths through woodland to four local heritage sites. What the Hurst Farm case demonstrates is precisely what this thesis argues *phronēsis* as a civic environmental virtue makes possible: not the imposition of environmental obligations from outside, but the emergence of environmental care from within a community's own deliberation about what it means to live well in a particular place. That the children of the local primary school participated in building the three-dimensional model at the heart of the process suggests, moreover, the kind of

³⁹⁶ Planning for Real is a nationally recognised community planning methodology operated by the Planning for Real Unit (part of GreenSquareAccord). Centred on a three-dimensional model of the local area, it enables residents to register their views on a range of issues, collaboratively identify priorities, and develop action plans in partnership with local agencies and authorities. It is deployed across contexts including neighbourhood regeneration, environmental and open space planning, and housing provision. For further information see <https://www.planningforreal.org.uk>. For the World Café method, see: i) Löhr, K., Weinhardt, M., & Sieber, S. (2020). The "World Café" as a Participatory Method for Collecting Qualitative Data. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1609406920916976.

intergenerational transmission of place-based attachment that the oikophilic dimension of civic virtue environmentalism requires and which no participation process, however well designed, can manufacture without the prior cultivation of the situated self.³⁹⁷

In this section I have shown how *phronēsis* emerges, as a foundational civic environmental virtue that develops the capacity to perceive and act upon the constitutive relationships between communities and their environments — relationships that make flourishing possible. Rather than imposing obligations, it cultivates practical wisdom through which individuals and communities deliberate together about how to live well within and with their environments. As the engagement with Bohn's green republican framework demonstrates, the distinctive contribution of this account lies not only in establishing *phronēsis* as environmentally significant but in grounding it in the ontology of the situated self and pairing it with the affective virtue that deliberative frameworks consistently require but leave untheorised. This deliberative, relational understanding of environmental virtue is complemented by and, as the preceding analysis reveals, depends upon a second civic environmental virtue: *oikophilia*, the love of home, which provides precisely the affective and place-based motivational foundation that practical wisdom alone cannot generate. I develop *oikophilia* in the section that follows, examining how this affective virtue operates alongside *phronēsis* to constitute a comprehensive framework for civic virtue environmentalism.

9.2.2 Oikophilia as an Environmental Virtue: Grounding Constitutive Communities in Place

In *Green Philosophy: How to think Seriously About the Planet* (2013), Roger Scruton offers a distinctive contribution to environmental thought from a conservative perspective, challenging both liberal individualism and abstract universalism in environmental ethics. Central to his argument is the concept of *oikophilia*—literally “love of home, derived from the Greek *oikos* (household, dwelling place) and *philos* (love, affection)— which he positions as the

³⁹⁷ Planning for Real Unit, 'Derbyshire Dales District Council – Hurst Farm, Matlock', <https://www.planningforreal.org.uk/projects/derbyshire-dailes-district-council-hurst-farm-matlock/> [accessed 24/04/26].

primary motivational foundation for genuine environmental stewardship. Scruton articulates this framework explicitly:

I argue that environmental problems must be addressed by all of us in our everyday circumstances, and should not be confiscated by the state. Their solution is possible only if people are motivated to confront them, and the task of government is to create the conditions in which the right kind of motive can emerge and solidify. I describe this motive (or rather, family of motives) as *oikophilia*, the love and feeling for home, and I set out the conditions in which *oikophilia* arises and the task of the state in making room for it. I defend local initiatives against global schemes, civil association against political activism, and small-scale institutions of friendship against large-scale and purpose-driven campaigns.³⁹⁸

This understanding reveals that for Scruton *oikophilia* extends considerably beyond what its etymological definition might initially suggest. It encompasses not merely physical dwelling spaces but the broader constellation of community bonds, shared traditions, and intergenerational obligations that constitute meaningful human habitation. Rather than mere sentimental attachment to familiar surroundings, *oikophilia* signifies a commitment to place-based responsibility and stewardship with deeper philosophical and ethical implications.

Scruton contrasts this approach with what he characterises as the detached abstract green environmentalism, typical of liberal approaches discussed in earlier chapters. Such approaches, he contends, rely on abstract moral imperatives divorced from lived experience and particular attachments, failing to generate the sustained motivation necessary for environmental care. This deficiency reveals a sense of what he terms as *oikophobia*, the opposite of *oikophilia*, which he defines as the “repudiation of home”.³⁹⁹ Through this concept he critiques the modern liberal culture, for systematically undermining the natural human tendency towards territorial attachment and

³⁹⁸ Scruton, R. (2013). *Green Philosophy: How to think Seriously About the Planet*. Atlantic Books Ltd. p.7

³⁹⁹ Scruton, R., p.146

responsibility for one's immediate surroundings. In his analysis he accuses modern political and cultural institutions of having eroded the very foundations upon which genuine environmental concern might rest.

According to Scruton escaping this culture of negation requires reconnecting with place and community, in other words, embracing *oikophilia* and relearning how to love our home. This reconnection is not merely nostalgic but practically necessary for environmental action. The concept operates on multiple scales simultaneously: the immediate household and neighbourhood, the broader landscape and region, and ultimately the nation as an extended home requiring care and protection. Scruton argues that *oikophilia* constitutes a primary motive in human life and provides the most reliable basis for making sacrifices on behalf of future generations:

The motive that emerges with full persuasive force at both levels is that of *oikophilia*, the love of home, a motive that comprehends all our deepest attachments, and which spills out in the moral, aesthetic and spiritual emotions that transfigure our world, creating in the midst of our emergencies a shelter that future generations also may enjoy.⁴⁰⁰

This emphasis on future generations occupies a central position in Scruton's environmental philosophy. However, his argument distinguishes itself crucially from liberal frameworks by locating the motivation for intergenerational responsibility not in abstract principles of justice or rights, but in the particular attachments fostered by *oikophilia* itself. While Scruton does not dismiss outright the claim that protecting the environment for future generations constitutes a matter of justice, he fundamentally challenges the efficacy of contractarian frameworks or rights-based approaches as motivational foundations for environmental conservation. The contrast emerges most sharply in his critique of liberal theories of intergenerational justice:

⁴⁰⁰ Scruton, R., p.127

It is true that we have a concern for our successors: and it is true that we are motivated in this concern by arguments of justice, like the father who looks after his property in justice to the children who will inherit it. But – as that example shows – our concern for other generations does not arise from some abstract theory of just distribution. It arises from our attachment to others: it is our ancestors, our children, our successors in title who awaken our concern. And the claims of those people have weight for us because we belong to them and they to us.⁴⁰¹

The familial metaphor Scruton employs here is significant—it grounds obligation not in hypothetical contracts or universal principles but in relationships of belonging and inheritance. This temporal dimension of belonging represents perhaps the most distinctive feature of *oikophilia* as an environmental ethic. Drawing explicitly from Edmund Burke’s main ideas on respect for the dead, the *little platoon* as the fundamental unit of social attachment, and the voice of tradition as a guide to practical wisdom—Scruton extends these conservative principles into the environmental sphere.⁴⁰² The temporal dimension of *oikophilia* thus encompasses not only love of present places but reverence for inherited landscapes and responsibility toward future generations who will inhabit these same territories. This three-generational covenant transforms environmental concern through what Burke famously described as “a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”⁴⁰³

It is precisely this understanding, this covenant binding past, present, and future, that elevates *oikophilia* beyond mere sentiment or preference into the realm of *civic obligation*. While Scruton establishes its significance as an environmental motive, my analytical contribution extends his framework by conceiving *oikophilia* specifically as a *civic environmental virtue*. This conceptual

⁴⁰¹ Scruton, R., p.122

⁴⁰² Scruton, R., p.104

⁴⁰³ Burke, E. (with McMahon, D. M.). (2003). *Reflections on the revolution in France* (F. M. Turner, Ed.). Yale University Press. p.82. (Original work published in 1790)

move recognises that the intergenerational dimension of *oikophilia* creates not merely personal attachment but civic duty—an obligation to sustain and cherish inherited places that transcends individual preference and becomes constitutive of citizenship itself. The virtue lies not simply in loving one's home but in recognising oneself as a custodian within a transgenerational chain of responsibility, accountable both to those who bequeathed these landscapes and to those who will receive them from our stewardship.

This understanding of *oikophilia* as a civic environmental virtue offers a response to the environmental crisis that presents a compelling alternative to liberal approaches characterised by universalism and detachment from territorial belonging. Contemporary environmental problems have undeniably reached global scale, and coordinated transnational solutions prove necessary in many cases. Yet this observation obscures a crucial temporal consideration: by the time environmental problems achieve global visibility, opportunities for effective intervention may have significantly diminished. Environmental degradation typically follows a progression in scales—beginning as localised phenomena that accumulate into regional crises before manifesting as planetary emergencies. The tragedy lies not in the absence of warning signs but in their regular neglect until problems transcend the communities where they originate. Addressing environmental challenges at their inception, when they remain manageable and when affected communities maintain direct relationships with degraded ecosystems, offers fundamentally greater prospects for meaningful intervention than mobilising global responses to catastrophic conditions. This way of thinking, working from particular places outward rather than imposing universal frameworks downward, constitutes the essential insight of Scruton's *oikophilia*. Genuine environmental concern, in this view, emerges not from abstract reasoning about global systems or utilitarian calculations about resource optimisation, but from direct, embodied experience of particular places and the attachments formed through inhabiting them.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁴ Scruton, R., pp.128-129

Mark Pennington (2013) captures the essential insight of Scruton's approach in his review of *Green Philosophy*:

For Scruton, conservative philosophy places great store on 'love of home' or 'oikophilia' and the practical reasoning that emanates from people going about their everyday business in the context of such a home. The task of conservative politics is to facilitate where possible this practical, localised problem-solving and the morals that go with it. By contrast, too much green theorising proceeds as if environmental issues can only be addressed via global consciousness-raising exercises and a radical transformation of human nature.⁴⁰⁵

Pennington's observation illuminates the tension between practical reasoning embedded in particular contexts and theoretical frameworks oriented toward universal consciousness transformation. This tension reflects Scruton's broader critique of liberal displacement which erodes place-based identity and community solidarity, characteristic of modern democratic societies.

For readers of *Green philosophy*, it is evident that Scruton's environmental thought emerges inseparably from his broader critique of liberal displacement. He argues that liberalism's emphasis on individual autonomy and universal rights has inadvertently undermined the very territorial attachments necessary for sustained environmental care.⁴⁰⁶ The increased mobility and rootlessness celebrated within liberal culture—presented as emancipatory freedoms from parochial constraints—have produced widespread disconnection from both the natural world generally and from one's locality specifically. This disconnection manifests materially in environmental degradation and socially in the decline of community membership and individual responsibility. Western liberal democracies, through institutional and cultural transformations, have dismantled traditional structures—extended and nuclear families, stable residential

⁴⁰⁵ Pennington, M. (2013). [Review of *Review of Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously About the Planet*, by R. Scruton]. *Environmental Values*, 22(4), 545–547.

⁴⁰⁶ Scruton, R., pp.17-20

communities, inherited practices and local knowledge systems—that historically mediated human relationships with environments. The consequence, in Scruton’s analysis, represents not merely a change in preferences but diminished capacity: without attachment to places, without substantive community membership and the loyalties such belonging entails, individuals and societies lose the affective and practical foundations for caring about their homes.

However, this emphasis on place-based environmental care through *oikophilia* might be prone to criticisms such as narrow, localised thinking, inadequate to respond to global-scale environmental challenges. Robin Attfield (1999) argues that the pursuit to improve living conditions and standards locally sometimes contributes to wider environmental deterioration, as exemplified by the Not-In-My-Back-Yard syndrome. He argues that preventing widespread environmental degradation requires expanding the spatial and temporal extent of our fields of significance.⁴⁰⁷

Nigel Dower (1994) on the other hand, offers a more nuanced analysis arguing that:

[...] I believe the great challenge is precisely to render ‘the environment’ as a very large thing into a field of significance, charged with sufficient motivating power to get us off our backsides. To adapt a perceptive remark made by the poet Piet Hein, since we are global citizens, we need to acquire global souls.⁴⁰⁸

For Dower, understanding the global environment as the primary field of significance proves necessary for addressing environmental crisis at its actual scale. He identifies a fundamental *mismatch* between the scale of cherished local environments and the levels at which meaningful change becomes necessary, suggesting that most of the adjustments in behaviour needed to sustain the overall environment will come from adjustments in local perceptions and

⁴⁰⁷ Attfield, R. (1999). *The ethics of the global environment*. Purdue University Press. pp. 14

⁴⁰⁸ Dower, N. (1994). The idea of the environment. In R. Attfield & A. Belsey (Eds.), *Philosophy and the natural environment* (pp. [page range]). Cambridge University Press. p.149

priorities that incorporate global awareness. However, Dower recognises the motivational limitations of abstract environmental ethics, acknowledging that what is important is how people perceive the environment. He further concedes that having an environment in the phenomenological sense is constitutive of well-being and that without familiarity with one's environment, lose orientation in life.

One might say, slightly paradoxically, that our environment includes the perspective in which we see the difference between a lived environment and an environment out there, and see the need to view them in some kind of relationship.[...] Now I take it that for any person to have an environment of some kind, is a necessary condition of their well-being. But it by no means follows that it is sufficient. If people are not familiar with their environment, and do not 'know their way about', they will be disoriented, fragmented, not perhaps able to lead a fully human life.⁴⁰⁹

Dower correctly identifies that phenomenological connection to one's environment constitutes a *necessary* condition for well-being and meaningful environmental action. However, where Dower leaves this as an observation about necessity without sufficiency, my argument provides what makes this necessary condition sufficient: the integration of *oikophilia* with *phronēsis* through *constitutive* communities. The civic environmental virtue framework I develop supplies the missing element—the capacity to extend place-based attachment through practical reasoning toward broader ecological concerns without losing motivational force. The challenge is not choosing between local phenomenological experience and global awareness but rather integrating both aspects of environmental duality that Dower identifies.

I argue that this apparent tension between local attachment and global responsibility rests on a misunderstanding of how environmental virtues develop through community membership

⁴⁰⁹ Dower, N. (1994). The idea of the environment. In R. Attfield & A. Belsey (Eds.), *Philosophy and the natural environment* (pp. [page range]). Cambridge University Press. p.151

and how particular attachments relate to broader concerns. In response to liberal territorial disconnection, *oikophilia* constitutes a civic environmental virtue founded on the recognition that place-based environmental care provides the motivational foundation for, rather than an obstacle to, meaningful environmental stewardship at any scale. What Dower identifies as necessary but insufficient becomes, through the mutual reinforcement of *oikophilia* and *phronēsis* within constitutive communities, both *necessary* and *sufficient* for grounded environmental responsibility that extends across scales.

Before, demonstrating how *oikophilia* achieves this scope, it is essential to understand what constitutes *place* and *home*. This interpretation generates a specific conceptual design that links the local, place, environment, and community. *Place* possesses an irreducible territorial dimension—it refers to actual geographical locations where human communities dwell. However, *territory* alone does not constitute place in the morally significant sense that *oikophilia* requires. Rather, place emerges when geographical territory becomes meaningful through inhabited practices of membership and mutual care—through patterns of dwelling, shared ritual, and collective stewardship that transform coordinates into home. The geographical territory provides the material substrate, but constitutive community membership animates that substrate with significance, narrative, and affection. Environment and surroundings refer not to nature as a separate domain external to human life but to all non-human participants—trees, waterways, soil, air, seasonal rhythms—that constitute the material conditions of common flourishing. These natural elements function not as backdrop to human activity but as active participants in the web of relationships that make meaningful community life possible. *Local* signifies not simply a spatial scale but the particularity of situated knowledge and direct engagement—it denotes the realm where abstract principles encounter concrete conditions, where environmental concern develops through daily encounter rather than theoretical contemplation. *Home* names the intersection where these concepts converge: the geographical location where membership, natural surroundings, and patterns of care become mutually constitutive. The connection between community and nature

becomes explicit through this framework: one cannot belong to a place without recognising the natural elements as co-participants in that belonging; one cannot protect a community without protecting the environmental conditions that sustain it. This is why *oikophilia* generates environmental virtue specifically—not as an addition to civic virtue, but as intrinsic to what it means to love one’s home. And this notion of home does not exclude urban existence in favour of rural living.

Rather, *oikophilia* identifies place through patterns of membership, mutual obligation, and shared habituation—the structures that constitute a location as a meaningful place of common flourishing. This clarification is essential in understanding how *oikophilia* encompasses the full range of contemporary environmental contexts without losing its critical environmental force. The question facing the metropolitan resident on the twenty-third floor of an urban tower is not whether sufficient “nature” exists in their immediate environment to cultivate *oikophilia*, but whether they understand themselves as members of a constitutive community whose shared home includes natural elements, however modest, that require protection and care. The few street trees visible from the high-rise window, the urban park several blocks away, the river running through the city, these are not amenities merely for individual satisfaction but participants in the community’s flourishing. Their degradation or elimination diminishes everyone’s home; their care becomes civic responsibility. The point is not about physical proximity to natural landscapes or the wilderness but about whether common purposes and meaningful community membership can contribute to human flourishing. The urban tower becomes a site for oikophilic virtue not through its architectural form but through the patterns of membership and civic responsibility enacted by its inhabitants.

This framework demonstrates how *oikophilia* operates across diverse environmental contexts without restricting environmental virtue to particular landscape types. *Oikophilia* avoids tendencies of romantic primitivism, which restricts environmental virtue to those with access to pristine nature and thereby excludes urban dwellers from meaningful environmental

participation. The love of home demonstrates that even modest natural presences become sites of civic virtue when understood as constitutive of home. The framework rejects the notion that only untouched wilderness merits protection or that environmental concern requires retreat from human settlement. Whether one inhabits a village surrounded by farmland and forest, or resides in a metropolitan apartment, the natural elements within one's environment—the few trees in the urban square, the village commons, the street plantings, the nearby woodland—become essential participants in the community's conditions of flourishing. The metropolitan resident's relationship with neighbourhood trees, the village dweller's connection to surrounding fields and forests, both exemplify the same principle: these natural presences become constitutive elements of a liveable home, their protection a civic duty that extends to care for their maintenance and advocacy for their enhancement. Oikophilia thus becomes an environmentally substantive virtue precisely because it begins from the particular—from the natural world present in one's immediate environment—and cultivates protective care rooted in concrete attachments rather than abstract universalism. The framework applies equally to diverse environmental contexts, from rural landscapes to urban settings, while maintaining that the natural elements within these contexts require sustained care and stewardship.

This understanding generates environmental obligation grounded not in abstract planetary consciousness but in the immediate recognition that one's home—and therefore one's capacity for flourishing—depends on the care and conservation of its natural elements, whatever form those elements take in one's particular place. This is why the dismissal of neighbourhood-based environmental concern as "narrow thinking" essentially misunderstands how environmental responsibility actually develops. Oikophilia as an environmental virtue demonstrates that lasting environmental commitment emerges through direct engagement with particular places and communities rather than through abstract appeals to global environmental movements. The cultivation of oikophilia begins with intimate knowledge of local relationships between humans

and natural environments and extends outward through expanding circles of care and responsibility.

The characterisation of local environmental concern as potentially contributing to broader deterioration through NIMBY syndrome reflects a misunderstanding of authentic community membership. Genuine environmental engagement through constitutive communities differs qualitatively from instrumental localism. Communities that develop civic and environmental virtues through shared stewardship practices cultivate understanding of their interconnection with broader ecological and social systems and generate an awareness of responsibility that extends beyond immediate community boundaries while remaining grounded in particular relationships and places.

This recognition potentially addresses the problem of motivation and agency in environmental ethics. Global environmental systems may be objective causal networks, as Dower argues, but environmental action occurs through particular agents embedded in specific contexts.⁴¹⁰ Abstract awareness of planetary crisis without the mediating structure of community membership produces concern divorced from meaningful engagement. Sustainable environmental behaviour develops through practices that connect individual character development with collective responsibility, and such practices require the sustained interaction that constitutive communities enable. The love of home generates motivation necessary for environmental sacrifice; community membership transforms that motivation into meaningful collective action rather than isolated preference.

Rather than representing a limitation on environmental thinking, community and place-based approaches provide the necessary foundation for addressing challenges at multiple scales. The environmental crisis reflects not the narrowness of local thinking but the erosion of community

⁴¹⁰ Dower, N. (1994). The idea of the environment. In R. Attfield & A. Belsey (Eds.), *Philosophy and the natural environment* (pp. [page range]). Cambridge University Press. pp. 146-147

membership and the civic virtues that enable responsibility for shared surroundings. If communities worldwide developed the virtues emerging from genuine stewardship of local systems, the aggregate effect would address many challenges that abstract planetary awareness cannot always resolve. Oikophilia, properly understood, does not require retreating from global environmental awareness but grounds such awareness in the particular attachments and community practices that make sustained commitment possible. It presents not an alternative to addressing global crisis but the foundation from which effective environmental responses at any scale must emerge: a foundation built not on isolated individual concern but on meaningful engagement with the places and communities that constitute identity itself.

9.2.3 Phronēsis and Oikophilia: Establishing the Civic Environmental Virtues

The preceding sections have established *phronēsis* and oikophilia as environmental virtues that enable individuals to recognise their responsibilities and embeddedness within communities and places, cultivating virtues through community membership rather than individual moral reflection. In this section I examine how *phronēsis* and oikophilia complement each other, demonstrating why these should be understood specifically as *civic environmental virtues* and how their mutual reinforcement strengthens both environmental and civic responsibility simultaneously.

The civic character of these virtues emerges from their cultivation through membership in constitutive communities rather than through abstract environmental consciousness or individual character-building alone. *Phronēsis* develops as community members participate in collective deliberation about shared environmental challenges, such as negotiating land use conflicts or determining sustainable practices for common resources. Through such deliberative engagement, individuals cultivate practical wisdom that enables them to recognise their embeddedness within the whole, understanding that individual flourishing proves inseparable from community flourishing and that the community cannot flourish if the environment sustaining it degrades. This

perception of the individual as constituted through communal relationships—the situated self whose identity develops through constitutive attachments—becomes realised through *phronetic* deliberation about environmental challenges affecting shared places. Similarly, *oikophilia* emerges through the shared traditions, narratives, and practices that constitute places as meaningful homes. Love of place develops not in isolation but through participation in communities that transmit stories about local landscapes, maintain seasonal rituals of environmental care, and establish places as worthy of sustained commitment across generations through the Burkean idea of a covenant linking past, present, and future. Both virtues are place-based rather than abstractly environmental—they concern particular forests, urban neighbourhoods, parks and agricultural landscapes where communities actually dwell, rather than *nature* or *the environment* conceived as separate domains. This territorial particularity links environmental responsibility directly to civic membership: caring for one's home becomes inseparable from responsibility toward fellow community members who share that home and whose flourishing depends on its environmental conditions.

These virtues complement each other in ways that strengthen environmental stewardship beyond what either of them achieves independently. *Oikophilia* provides essential foundations that enhance the operation of practical wisdom in environmental contexts. Love of home supplies motivational grounding that ensures *phronēsis* operates with genuine care rather than detached calculations. When community members exercise practical wisdom about environmental trade-offs, *oikophilia* ensures their deliberation remains emotionally invested in outcomes rather than becoming abstract, technocratic decision-making disconnected from lived experience. Moreover, love of place generates contextual knowledge that enriches practical wisdom. Oikophilic attachment motivates the sustained attention through which communities develop intimate familiarity with local ecological contexts such as seasonal patterns, species interactions or soil characteristics. This embodied knowledge, accumulated through generations of attentive inhabitation, provides the situated understanding that practical judgment requires when

addressing environmental challenges in particular places. Finally, oikophilic attachment ensures sustainable commitment across extended temporal horizons. Place-based love maintains engagement through emotional investment when outcomes remain uncertain across generations, preventing the detached rationalism that might abandon environmental projects when they become difficult or when immediate results prove vague.

Equally, *phronēsis* guides and refines oikophilic impulses in ways that expand their scope and effectiveness. Practical wisdom enables recognition of broader environmental relationships within which particular places exist. Through deliberation about how local environments connect to regional systems, for example how air quality reflects regional patterns or how biodiversity connects across landscapes, *phronēsis* helps expand concern beyond immediate locality to encompass the broader ecological context. This expansion occurs not by weakening particular attachments but by revealing their wider implications, transforming localised care into regionally responsible stewardship. Additionally, practical wisdom mediates competing goods when place-based loyalties generate conflicts. Environmental decision-making regularly presents tensions between employment and conservation, between development and preservation, between different conceptions of what makes places flourish. When logging communities face habitat protection requirements, or when agricultural regions confront water consumption restrictions, *phronēsis* provides the deliberative capacity to navigate these trade-offs wisely through situated judgment that considers multiple dimensions of community flourishing—economic sustainability, ecological health, social cohesion, intergenerational responsibility—recognising that perfect solutions rarely exist but that wise choices remain possible. Moreover, practical wisdom extends oikophilic care temporally by helping communities think carefully about long-term flourishing. While *oikophilia* already encompasses intergenerational responsibility through the Burkean covenant, *phronēsis* enables the practical reasoning necessary to determine what long-term flourishing actually requires in specific circumstances helping thus communities to decide which

present actions genuinely serve future generations and which merely satisfy immediate preferences while degrading the conditions that make places loveable across time.

The mutual reinforcement of these virtues generates grounded wisdom constituting environmental decision-making emotionally invested and prudentially sound.⁴¹¹ Community members debate environmental challenges as decisions affecting places they genuinely love, ensuring deliberation remains connected to real stakes while maintaining the required discipline through practical reasoning. Neither sentiment without prudence nor calculation without affection, this integrated disposition enables communities to address environmental challenges effectively. Responding to criticisms that might accuse such an approach as ineffective for global environmental crises, I argue that this integration also produces contextual universalism because environmental concern begins from particular places and relationships but can extend through practical reasoning to encompass broader environmental scales without losing motivational force. Communities developing sophisticated stewardship of local environments cultivate dispositions applicable to environmental challenges at expanding scales: attentiveness to ecological relationships, capacity for deliberative judgment, and appreciation for intergenerational responsibility. The practical wisdom developed through managing local commons proves transferable to regional and even global concerns, while affective grounding in particular places maintains the motivational resources that abstract planetary consciousness fails to provide.

Their complementarity demonstrates why *oikophilia* and *phronēsis* must be understood not merely as environmental virtues, but specifically as *civic* environmental virtues. Both are cultivated through participation in constitutive communities characterised by shared traditions,

⁴¹¹ To clarify, the mutual reinforcement described here is specific to the relationship between *phronēsis* and *oikophilia*. Practical wisdom enables more sophisticated and environmentally informed expressions of place-attachment, while affective connection to particular places provides the motivational grounding and contextual specificity necessary for practical wisdom to develop and function effectively. While my broader theoretical framework draws on virtue ethics, this does not require that all virtues mutually reinforce one another in this manner. The claim is that these two particular virtues exhibit a necessary interdependence for my concept of civic virtue environmentalism, not that virtue ethics demands universal mutual reinforcement among all virtues.

collective narratives about place, and structures of mutual accountability. The traditions transmit accumulated environmental knowledge and practices of care; the narratives establish places as worthy of sustained commitment across generations; and ensure that individual actions affecting common environments remain subject to collective evaluation. Cultivating these virtues simultaneously strengthens both environmental responsibility and civic obligation because the same practices develop both dimensions together. When community members engage in collective deliberation about environmental challenges or participate in practices of place-based stewardship, they are not performing separate acts of environmental care and civic participation—they are engaging in a unified practice where environmental responsibility and civic responsibility prove mutually constitutive. This integration explains why exclusively individualist approaches to environmental virtue ethics, which conceive virtue cultivation as private moral development, fail to capture the distinctively civic mechanisms through which environmental responsibility actually emerges and sustains itself in practice.

The pairing of *oikophilia* and *phronēsis* is what distinguishes the civic virtue environmentalism developed here from green republican accounts of environmental *phronēsis* discussed earlier (Bohn, 2021; Barry and Smith, 2008). Green republican frameworks foreground deliberative preference transformation but leave underdeveloped the affective and territorial grounding that *oikophilia* supplies. It is precisely this combination — practical wisdom embedded within place-based attachment — that renders the framework distinctively civic rather than primarily procedural.

Having established *phronēsis* and *oikophilia* as mutually reinforcing civic environmental virtues, the question becomes how these virtues integrate with the broader theoretical framework developed throughout this thesis. The encumbered self, constitutive communities, and civic environmental virtues together constitute the elements of what I term *civic virtue environmentalism*—a coherent alternative to liberal individualist approaches to environmental responsibility. The following section brings these concepts together into a unified framework and

explores its implications for environmental governance, demonstrating how this civic communitarian approach addresses practical challenges that liberal environmentalism fails to adequately resolve.

9.3 Towards a Civic Virtue Environmentalism

Throughout the thesis I have traced a sustained critique of liberal individualism and its inadequacy for addressing environmental challenges. This critique begins with the economic rationality of *homo economicus* in Chapter 2, continues with possessive individualism's conception of the self as property in Chapter 3, and extends to the problematic interpretation of freedom as economic liberty, along with the influence of free-market thinking on nature, in Chapters 4 and 5. Against this critical background, Chapters 6 to 8 develop alternative conceptual resources. Chapter 6 examines common-pool resource management through collective action. Chapter 7 exposes the limitations of liberal individualism's approach to environmental challenges and outlines alternative responses. Chapter 8 advances the notion of the situated self—constituted through community membership rather than pre-social autonomy—together with the idea of constitutive communities as essential contexts for identity formation and moral development. It also reconceptualises responsibility as emerging from embeddedness rather than contractual obligation.

Building upon these foundations, Chapter 9 introduces *phronēsis* and *oikophilia* as civic environmental virtues cultivated through participation in such communities. These elements—the situated self, constitutive communities, and civic environmental virtues—now converge into what I term *civic virtue environmentalism*: a framework that redefines environmental responsibility as integral to civic community life rather than as an individual preference or market externality.

9.3.1 Defining Civic Virtue Environmentalism: A Conceptual Integration of the Situated Self, Constitutive Community and Civic Responsibility

Civic virtue environmentalism constitutes an approach to environmental responsibility grounded in three integrated premises. First, environmental agents are *situated selves* whose identities and moral capacities develop through constitutive relationships with communities and places rather than existing as pre-defined autonomous individuals. Second, environmental responsibility emerges through participation in *constitutive communities* characterised by shared traditions, collective narratives about place, and structures of mutual accountability—communities that provide the contexts within which environmental virtues can be cultivated and environmental obligations realised. Third, effective environmental stewardship requires the cultivation of *civic environmental virtues*, particularly *phronēsis* and *oikophilia*, which enable individuals to exercise practical wisdom about environmental challenges while sustaining an affective attachment to the particular places their communities inhabit. This framework positions environmental responsibility as essentially civic in character. It emerges not from individual moral reflection, market calculations, or abstract environmental consciousness, but through the practices of membership in communities embedded within particular ecological contexts. Environmental stewardship becomes a constitutive practice of relational community life—inseparable from civic participation, collective deliberation about common goods, and shared responsibility for places that sustain communal flourishing.

The integration of these premises can be understood as follows. The *situated self* provides the ontological foundation: persons exist as embedded within webs of relationships that constitute their identities and shape their capacities for environmental responsibility. This ontology necessitates *constitutive communities* as the contexts within which situated selves develop. These communities transmit environmental knowledge, render places meaningful through shared narratives, and establish structures of mutual accountability through which individual actions affecting common environments are collectively evaluated. Within these communal contexts, *civic*

environmental virtues emerge through participatory practices. *phronēsis* develops as members engage in deliberation about shared environmental challenges, cultivating the practical wisdom required to navigate complex trade-offs while recognising their embeddedness within ecological and social wholes. *Oikophilia* develops through participation in traditions and practices that establish places as homes worthy of enduring commitment across generations. These virtues, once cultivated, strengthen both the situated self's capacity for environmental responsibility and the community's effectiveness in environmental governance. A person exercising *phronēsis* and *oikophilia* within a community can achieve forms of environmental stewardship unattainable to atomistic individuals motivated by self-interest. This understanding transforms the very meaning of responsibility. It is neither an external obligation imposed upon unwilling individuals nor a voluntary choice made by autonomous agents. Rather, it arises as communities discover and fulfil the obligations inherent in their constitutive relationships with the places and ecosystems that sustain them. Individual, community, and environmental flourishing thus become inseparable, for the same relationships that constitute persons and communities also embed them within particular ecological contexts.

Having outlined the internal logic of civic virtue environmentalism, it is necessary to clarify how this framework departs from dominant liberal individualist approaches of environmental responsibility. The civic virtue environmentalism I propose differs fundamentally from liberal individualist approaches in its conception of agency, responsibility, and governance. Liberal environmentalism tends to view individuals as detached agents cooperating through contractual arrangements or as consumers addressing environmental problems through market choices. By contrast, civic virtue environmentalism holds that the dispositions required for genuine environmental responsibility—such as practical wisdom, attachment to place, and awareness of one's embeddedness—can only develop within relational communities. It thus affirms *situated selves* rather than *unencumbered selves*, *constitutive communities* rather than *abstract universal ones*, and *civic responsibility* rather than *individual preference*. Environmental problems cannot be solved

through incentive-based individualism, because the very capacity for environmental responsibility arises only within the communal contexts that liberalism's atomistic ontology neglects.

This divergence extends to approaches to environmental governance. Liberal frameworks emphasise individual choice mechanisms such as carbon taxes, cap-and-trade systems, sustainable consumer preferences—solutions that assume environmental goods can be protected through market exchanges among independent agents. Civic virtue environmentalism, by contrast, emphasises institutional designs that strengthen constitutive relationships between communities and places: supporting collective deliberation about environmental challenges, maintaining traditions of environmental stewardship, and creating structures through which communities can exercise environmental governance while cultivating the virtues such governance requires.

While civic virtue environmentalism offers a theoretical framework grounded in communitarian and civic approaches to environmental challenges, its principles are not merely abstract or utopian. Successful examples of community-based environmental governance already demonstrate these dynamics in practice, affirming the framework's relevance beyond theory. These cases reveal how self-interest is reshaped through the recognition of interdependence, how individual capacities develop through shared practices oriented toward the common good, and how civic virtues sustain effective environmental stewardship. The following section therefore turns to the empirical dimension, examining instances where these principles are enacted within real communities and exploring how they illuminate the practical workings of civic virtue environmentalism.

9.3.2 Theory in Practice: The Empirical Manifestations for Civic Virtue Environmentalism

Having established the conceptual framework of civic virtue environmentalism and its philosophical underpinnings in the situated self and constitutive community, this section explores its empirical manifestations. In doing so, it revisits key insights from Ostrom's research on common-pool resource governance, positioning her case studies as practical demonstrations of

civic virtue environmentalism in action.⁴¹² It also draws on Shutkin's community-based environmental initiatives in the United States and on two further cases, Incredible Edible Todmorden and the Carrifran Wildwood project.⁴¹³ Each of these cases illustrates dimensions of the framework that governance-focused examples alone cannot capture.⁴¹⁴

As discussed in Chapter 6, Ostrom's extensive fieldwork revealed that communities across diverse environmental contexts are capable of creating and maintaining enduring systems of collective resource management. Her findings challenge the pessimistic assumptions embedded in Hardin's tragedy of the commons and the game-theoretic models—the prisoner's dilemma and Olson's logic of collective action—that dominated resource management discourse.⁴¹⁵ What these communities demonstrate is not merely effective cooperation and pragmatic adaptation but a moral and civic achievement: they exemplify the capacity of individuals, situated within relationships of interdependence, to act as responsible stewards of the shared goods.

Ostrom's empirical cases—such as the self-governed inshore fisheries of Alanya, Turkey, alongside her analyses of irrigation systems and forest communities—show that sustainable governance arises not from centralised management or market incentives, but from mutual trust, communication, and the co-design of rules by members of a community. These elements exemplify what I have described in this thesis as the *situated self*: the individual understood as embedded in networks of moral and civic relations, rather than as an isolated, self-interested agent. By engaging in reciprocal monitoring, negotiation, and implementation, these individuals exercise *phronēsis* motivated by *oikophilia*. Members of the community apply the practical wisdom necessary to balance self-interest with collective welfare. Individuals flourish as part of the whole and not as

⁴¹² Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.

⁴¹³ Shutkin, W. A. (2001). *The Land that Could be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*. MIT Press.

⁴¹⁴ See Borders Forest Trust. *About Carrifran Wildwood*. <https://bordersforesttrust.org/wild-heart/carrifran-wildwood/> [accessed 25/04/26], and Incredible Edible Network. *Incredible Edible Todmorden* <https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/our-story/> [accessed 25/04/26].

⁴¹⁵ Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press. pp.6-7

isolated units. This prudential realisation, characteristic of the successful commons arrangements Ostrom observed, is a manifestation of civic virtue environmentalism: it demonstrates that the moral capacities of citizens—not merely the rational calculations of economic actors—are central to environmental governance. The trust and mutual accountability that sustain these communities embody constitutive community: a moral and institutional organisation through which individuals realise their agency and identity as members rather than mere consumers or subjects of a centralised regulation.

Ostrom's design principles for the governance of common-pool resources, including clearly defined boundaries, collective decision-making, congruence between rules and local conditions, effective monitoring, graduated sanctions, and mechanisms for conflict resolution, reflect not only institutional rationality but also moral order.⁴¹⁶ They are the civic norms of a functioning community that has internalised responsibility for the common good. The moral insight embedded in these arrangements is that sustainable governance depends less on external enforcement than on the cultivation of civic dispositions *within* the community itself.

The Alanya fishery case, examined in Chapter 6, provides a particularly compelling illustration. Here, local fishers devised a system of rotating fishing spots through a lottery, which reduced conflict, prevented overexploitation, and ensured equitable resource distribution. This self-governed arrangement emerged through collective decision-making and trial-and-error experimentation, allowing the fishers to craft rules tailored to the ecological dynamics of their fishery. Here we see the situated self in practice—individuals acting not as autonomous maximisers of utility but as moral agents whose flourishing is bound to the flourishing of their community. The fishers' capacity to design and enforce their own institutional arrangements

⁴¹⁶ Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 91-95

demonstrates *phronēsis* as context-sensitive practical reasoning: they assessed local conditions, anticipated long-term consequences, and deliberated collectively about sustainable practices.⁴¹⁷

Similarly, Ostrom's research and findings on the Swiss alpine villages, such as Törbel, provide another instance of the situated self operating within a constitutive community. In these communities, the governance of meadows and forests was sustained not by centralised authority but by the collective prudence of the villagers themselves. Through shared rule-making, proportional use rights, and participatory enforcement, individuals recognised their dependence on one another for both subsistence and the preservation of the commons. The *wintering rule*, which limited grazing according to each household's capacity to feed its cattle through the winter, exemplified an equilibrium between individual interest and the common good. The system of mutual monitoring, fines, and periodic assemblies illustrates that responsibility and trust were institutionalised through civic norms rather than imposed externally.⁴¹⁸ In these self-regulated arrangements, villagers acted as moral agents who flourished through their participation in the knowledge, narratives and values of their community. Ostrom's emphasis on the long endurance of such practices on common-pool resource management underlines my insight: that sustainable governance and human flourishing are achieved when individuals, as situated selves, act as agents of shared values agreed within a constitutive community, exercising civic virtues grounded in reciprocity, prudence, responsibility and a shared sense of belonging.

Thus, these empirical cases illustrate the essential tenet of civic virtue environmentalism: environmental problems are not merely technical failures but civic failures. Where Hardin saw inevitable tragedy arising from individual self-interest, Ostrom's findings reveal the underlying potential for self-interest turning into prudential and communal reasoning. In this sense, the tragedy of the commons is averted not through Leviathan-like control or market privatisation, but

⁴¹⁷ Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press. pp.17-20

⁴¹⁸ Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press. pp.61-65

through the moral and civic capacities of communities acting as political animals in the Aristotelian sense—reasoning together about the good life and the conditions of its sustainability.

What makes Ostrom's contribution particularly significant for my argument in this thesis is her demonstration that resource users are not passive actors trapped by structural constraints. She observes that:

The prisoners in the famous dilemma cannot change the constraints imposed on them by the district attorney; they are in jail. Not all users of natural resources are similarly incapable of changing their constraints. As long as individuals are viewed as prisoners, policy prescriptions will address this metaphor. I would rather address the question of how to enhance the capabilities of those involved to change the constraining rules of the game to lead to outcomes other than remorseless tragedies.⁴¹⁹

This observation challenges deterministic views of human behaviour in commons dilemmas. Ostrom's reframing opens space for the cultivation of capabilities and virtues necessary for collective environmental stewardship. In addition, what is evident here is the role of constitutive community at work that can deliver the moral and institutional requirements through which civic virtues are practised, sustained, and transmitted across generations.

The civic environmentalism advanced by Shutkin in *The Land That Could Be* (2000) represents another empirical manifestation of the framework of civic virtue environmentalism proposed in this thesis. Shutkin's project is explicitly concerned with the relationship between environmental quality and the civic health of communities. As he explains:

I call this new approach civic environmentalism because it marries a concern for the physical health of communities with an understanding that part and parcel of environmental quality

⁴¹⁹ Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press. p. 6

is overall civic health. Civic environmentalism holds that the physical environment—the places people inhabit or otherwise affect through their actions—influences our behaviour and our sense of place, community, and well-being. [...] In short, the environment is the sum of all those places in cities, suburbs, and rural areas that play a central part in constituting our sense of ourselves as individuals and members of a community and that demand our care and attention if they are to enhance rather than diminish that sense.⁴²⁰

According to Shutkin's definition there is an essential connection between environment and democratic life: environmental degradation and civic decline are mutually reinforcing, while environmental restoration and civic renewal are inseparable processes. He therefore, links ecological stewardship with the cultivation of civic participation, social capital, and shared responsibility, principles that resonate with the foundations of civic virtue environmentalism I have advanced.

Through his case studies in *The Land That Could Be*, Shutkin demonstrates how citizens can reclaim both place and civic life by engaging directly in local environmental projects. Each example—from the urban agriculture of the Dudley neighbourhood in Boston to the *smart-growth* initiatives of suburban New Jersey—illustrates the moral and political agency of ordinary citizens who, through community empowerment, common purpose, cooperation, and deliberation, transform their surroundings and, in doing so, revitalise both individual and collective life. Of particular relevance here is the Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative (DSNI), founded in 1985 in response to decades of urban decline and neglect. Residents, many of whom shared an agricultural heritage, united to convert derelict land and brownfield sites into productive spaces through the Urban Agricultural Strategy (1997), which promoted local food production and value-added enterprises. The DSNI not only restored the physical environment but also rekindled a sense of belonging, stewardship, and civic purpose. This example is significant because it reveals that

⁴²⁰ Shutkin, W. A. (2000). *The land that could be: Environmentalism and democracy in the twenty-first century*. MIT Press. pp. xiv–xv

the virtues of civic environmentalism are not confined to rural or wilderness settings; they also emerge within densely inhabited urban contexts. The civic environmental virtues of *oikophilia* and *phronēsis* are exemplified in the Dudley project: attachment to local territory, a unifying sense of purpose, and the continuity between past, present, and future demonstrate that such virtues can be cultivated even within urban and industrialised landscapes.⁴²¹

Shutkin's case studies provide actual illustrations of the civic virtues this thesis identifies as essential for environmental stewardship. They show how citizens, acting within specific places, can embody the prudence, responsibility, and care that civic virtue environmentalism seeks to theorise. His work confirms that environmental governance is not only a technical or institutional enterprise but is essentially grounded in community membership and the shared pursuit of the common good.

Yet the civic virtue environmentalism I propose in this thesis moves beyond Shutkin's civic environmentalism. While his analysis originates in the sociological diagnosis of declining civic life and seeks its regeneration through local ecological practice, my framework advances a normative philosophical interpretation of why that decline occurred and how it can be reversed. Shutkin's concern is the erosion of social capital and community membership; mine lies in the moral ontology that underpins that erosion—the liberal conception of the economic man and the reduction of freedom to economic freedom. Civic virtue environmentalism therefore extends Shutkin's insights by grounding them in a theory of the *situated self* and *constitutive community*, arguing that the recovery of civic life requires the cultivation of specific virtues—*phronēsis* and *oikophilia*—within those communities. Where civic environmentalism emphasises participatory democracy and place-based action, civic virtue environmentalism provides the moral and philosophical foundations that make such participation achievable.

⁴²¹ Shutkin, W. A. (2000). *The land that could be: Environmentalism and democracy in the twenty-first century*. MIT Press. pp.143-165

Those foundations, however, are best understood not through philosophical elaboration alone but through cases that show what civic virtue environmentalism looks like when it is enacted. The two that follow illuminate the dimensions of the framework that philosophical argument alone cannot convey: the constitutive role of oikophilia as the motivational foundation for environmental care; the intergenerational covenant through which communities act as stewards of places that precede and will outlast them; and the expression of phronēsis in practice, as residents deliberate collectively about how to sustain the conditions for their own and their community's flourishing.

The first is Incredible Edible Todmorden, a grassroots initiative established in 2008 in a post-industrial West Yorkshire town by residents concerned about local decline and disconnection from the environment.⁴²² Rather than directing appeals to distant political authorities, the founders began planting vegetables, herbs, and fruit in public spaces across the town — railway platforms, schoolyards, the front yard of the police station — inviting anyone to harvest freely and without condition. The founding gesture was explicitly civic: an act of reclaiming shared space, rebuilding shared life, and reasserting the town as a place worth caring for. Independent evaluation concluded that the project's most significant achievement was not food production but the reinvigoration of local identity and the cultivation of civic pride — a finding that confirms the thesis's central claim that environmental improvement and civic renewal are not separate projects but expressions of the same underlying commitment to place. The initiative also exhibited the intergenerational transmission of ecological and practical knowledge that MacIntyre identifies as constitutive of living traditions: the community gathered historical records, recipes, and first-hand accounts spanning two centuries to reconnect present practice with inherited ways of inhabiting the land.⁴²³ What Todmorden instantiates is civic virtue environmentalism operating at

⁴²² Warhurst, P., & Dobson, J. (2014). *Incredible! Plant Veg, Grow a Revolution*. Troubador Publishing.

⁴²³ Morley, A., Farrier, A., & Dooris, M. (2017). *Propagating Success? The Incredible Edible Model. Final Report*. University of Central Lancashire. <https://susfoodnorthwestorguk.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/susfoodnw-iet-evaluation-full-report.pdf> [accessed 24/04/26]

neighbourhood scale: a community discovering that environmental care and civic renewal are not parallel projects but a single act of recovering belonging, enacted through the shared deliberation and practical wisdom — *phronēsis* — of residents reflecting together about their place, and sustained by the constitutive attachment to that place that this thesis identifies as *oikophilia* in its most practical and accessible form.

The second is the Carrifran Wildwood project, initiated in 1993 by a group of local residents in the Southern Uplands of Scotland with the ambition of restoring an entire valley catchment to its pre-agricultural condition. Almost all of the £400,000 needed to purchase the 660-hectare valley was raised from private individuals — approximately 600 founders donating several hundred pounds each — without recourse to public funding and before the vocabulary of crowdfunding existed. The project's rationale was rooted not in abstract environmental principle but in detailed place-historical knowledge: pollen records preserved in peat cores were analysed to understand what the land had been for the preceding ten thousand years, and restoration proceeded from that inherited ecological memory. The first trees were planted on 1 January 2000, with one hundred people present. Over subsequent decades, some 750,000 native trees have been established and wildlife absent for generations has returned. Carrifran enacts precisely the Burkean covenant that Scruton identifies as the temporal structure of *oikophilia* — a partnership between those who have gone, those who are here, and those who are to come — and does so through civic action rather than state mandate or market mechanism.⁴²⁴ Carrifran instantiates civic virtue environmentalism in its most philosophically complete form: a constitutive community, bound by love of a particular place and by a sense of obligation stretching backward and forward across generations, enacting environmental stewardship as a civic rather than a market or state-led act — and confirming, through the wave of similar initiatives it has since inspired across the United Kingdom, that place-based civic virtue, once cultivated within a community and reinforced by *phronesis* carries its own

⁴²⁴ Ashmole, M., & Ashmole, P. (2009). *The Carrifran Wildwood Story: Ecological Restoration from the Grass Roots*. Borders Forest Trust.

generative force, reproducing itself not through institutional mandate but through the example of people recognising their embeddedness in a shared home.

Taken together, these four cases — Ostrom's commons communities, Shutkin's civic neighbourhoods, Incredible Edible Todmorden, and Carrifran Wildwood — provide the empirical foundations upon which the normative framework developed in this thesis rests. Across contexts as different as Turkish inshore fisheries, Swiss alpine pastures, a post-industrial Yorkshire town, and a Scottish upland valley, the same underlying dynamic recurs: environmental responsibility emerges not from market incentives, regulatory enforcement, or abstract moral obligation, but from the civic capacities of situated selves acting within constitutive communities that are emotionally and historically invested in particular places. Each case illustrates a different facet of civic virtue environmentalism — Ostrom's cases demonstrate *phronēsis* as practical governance capacity; Shutkin's demonstrate the inseparability of civic and environmental renewal; Todmorden demonstrates *oikophilia* as the motivational foundation for neighbourhood-scale environmental action; and Carrifran demonstrates the intergenerational, restorative dimension of place-based civic virtue in its most philosophically developed form. Together they confirm that the solution to environmental degradation does not lie in redesigning incentive structures or extending regulatory reach, but in recovering the conditions under which civic virtue can be cultivated: constitutive communities with strong place attachments, shared practices of stewardship, and the practical wisdom to govern their environments as expressions of a common good. The implications of this conclusion for how environmental governance should be designed and understood are the concern of the section that follows.

9.3.3 Implications for Environmental Governance and Practice

The theoretical and empirical insights developed in this chapter suggests that effective environmental governance requires a fundamental reorientation—from policies centred on individual choice and market efficiency to frameworks that strengthen the constitutive

relationships between communities and places. The civic virtue environmentalism advanced here provides both a moral and institutional rationale for this shift. Environmental policy becomes less a matter of incentivising discrete behaviours and more a question of developing the cultivation of the civic capacities that enable individuals and communities to exercise civic responsibility for the environments they inhabit. Supporting local food systems, community land trusts, and place-based conservation initiatives — of the kind illustrated by Incredible Edible Todmorden and the Carrifran Wildwood project — represents not merely pragmatic reform but the institutional expression of civic virtues such as *phronēsis* and *oikophilia*. In this sense, environmental governance should aim to embed citizens within the moral and environmental contexts that sustain them, fostering participatory structures through which environmental responsibility becomes a constitutive practice of community life rather than an external imposition upon it.

These governance implications demonstrate how the civic virtue framework operates across multiple scales—from individual disposition to institutional design, from local practice to broader policy architecture. By showing how environmental virtues can be institutionally supported and practically enacted, this chapter completes the constructive project begun in Chapter 8. Where earlier chapters diagnosed the inadequacies of liberal individualism and developed the philosophical foundations for an alternative, this chapter has articulated what *civic virtue environmentalism* means in practice: a reorientation of environmental governance toward the cultivation of civic capacities, the strengthening of constitutive communities, and the nourishing of oikophilic attachments to place. In doing so, it demonstrates how environmental responsibility becomes intelligible and actionable when grounded in the participatory practices, shared narratives, and place-based commitments that constitute civic community life.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a central problem confronting contemporary political and moral philosophy and environmental ethics: the conceptual resources of liberal individualism are insufficient for cultivating the forms of environmental responsibility demanded by the environmental crisis. The economic man of liberalism—more precisely, of economic neoliberalism—pursuing rational self-interest within competitive markets, lacks a substantive conception of responsibility and, shaped by the extreme individualism that defines his ontology, is unable to engage in the cooperation required for commons management or long-term environmental stewardship. Possessive individualism's atomistic ontology severs the constitutive relationships between persons, communities, and places that ground durable environmental commitment. Consequently, market-based approaches and conceptions of freedom limited to economic liberty fail to address environmental degradation's moral and civic dimensions. They displace questions of virtue, individual and collective obligation, and the common good, thereby eroding the very capacities upon which environmental responsibility depends. The model of economic freedom as unlimited choice offers only the illusion of liberation: it fosters consumption rather than flourishing and, in severing individuals from meaningful relationships and places, undermines the very capacities required for environmental responsibility.

Responding to these inadequacies required a systematic critique of liberalism's foundational assumptions. Chapters Two to Five examined how *homo economicus*, *possessive individualism*, free-market environmentalism, and *freedom* interpreted as *economic* liberty each fail to provide adequate grounds for environmental responsibility. Yet critique alone is insufficient. Identifying what liberal individualism cannot accomplish does not reveal what alternative frameworks might succeed. The task, therefore, was to move beyond critique towards the constructive development of a model capable of re-grounding environmental responsibility in a richer moral and political framework. Possessive individualism, with its vision of the self as self-

owning and unencumbered, cultivates precisely those forms of estrangement from place, community, and ecological limits that render sustained environmental commitment unachievable.

This constructive turn was undertaken through engagement not only with communitarian traditions and virtue ethics, but also with the literature on commons governance and collective action that challenges the individualism embedded in dominant policy frameworks. Chapter Six examined the tragedy of the commons and introduced Ostrom's empirical challenge to models that assume individuals' incapacity for cooperation, showing instead how communities cultivate the capabilities necessary for collective action. Chapter Seven extended this critique by demonstrating the limitations of liberal individualism when confronting environmental challenges, revealing the need for a thicker understanding of agency and responsibility. Chapter Eight then drew on the work of Sandel, MacIntyre, and Taylor to articulate the situated self and constitutive communities as the foundations upon which environmental responsibility becomes intelligible, reconceptualising obligation as arising from embeddedness rather than contract. Together, these chapters prepared the ground for Chapter Nine's development of *phronēsis* and *oikophilia* as civic environmental virtues, cultivated through participation in communities characterised by shared practices, collective narratives, attachments to place, and orientation toward the *common good*.

From *economic man* to *situated self*, from *possessive individualism* to *constitutive community*, and from market freedom to civic virtue, the thesis has traced a coherent progression that moves from critique to construction. The resulting framework of *civic virtue environmentalism* integrates these elements into a paradigm that reimagines environmental responsibility as integral to civic community life rather than as a matter of individual preference. This civic and virtuous approach addresses precisely those dimensions of environmental obligation that the possessive individualist and economistic strand of liberalism cannot adequately conceptualise: the embeddedness of persons within communities and places; the cultivation of virtues through participatory practice;

the grounding of responsibility in constitutive relationships; and the integration of environmental stewardship with civic membership and local loyalties.

Civic virtue environmentalism also distinguishes itself from dominant strands of environmental ethics, which often rely on rights-based claims—whether the rights of non-human nature, the rights of future generations, or appeals to environmental justice. While such concerns are essential, this thesis has argued that they presuppose deeper moral capacities that the framework of possessive individualism and market-oriented liberalism examined here cannot cultivate. By grounding environmental responsibility in civic virtue, community membership, and oikophilic attachment, the framework developed here offers the foundations out of which such concerns can be meaningfully addressed. Virtues such as *phronēsis* and *oikophilia* do not bypass questions of justice; they provide the dispositions and the forms of belonging through which responsibilities to future generations, non-human nature, and local ecologies can be internalised and acted upon. In doing so, this thesis gestures toward a post-liberal, post-utilitarian environmental ethic rooted not in preference satisfaction or abstract rights, but in shared practices of care, attachment, and civic responsibility.

Civic virtue environmentalism thus reframes the environmental question as a moral and civic one: how communities cultivate the virtues necessary to sustain the places they inhabit. It offers a framework through which the restoration of environmental integrity coincides with the renewal of civic life. By recovering the interdependence of self, community, and environment, it points beyond the conceptual impasse of the possessive individualist and economistic conception of the self toward a more integrated vision of human and natural flourishing. In this sense, the thesis contributes not merely to environmental ethics but to the broader philosophical reconstruction of modernity's moral foundations—one that seeks, ultimately, not only to mitigate environmental crisis but to restore the conditions for a shared and enduring *common good*, within which

environmental stewardship is understood as a central expression of civic virtue rather than an optional moral supplement.

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