**ARTICLES**

# The Moral Potential of Eco-Guilt and Eco-Shame: Emotions that Hinder or Facilitate Pro-Environmental Change?

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## Abstract

The emotions of guilt and shame have an effect on how individuals feel and behave in relation to environmental crises, yet studies of the moral potential of these emotions remain limited. From a philosophical perspective, some scholars have defended using eco-guilt and eco-shame as morally constructive emotions due to their ability to evoke more pro-environmental behaviour. Meanwhile, others have posited that there are pitfalls to these emotions, claiming that they perpetuate a problematic individualised focus, which diverts attention from the collective and structural conditions considered necessary for pro-environmental change. This paper critically examines these two differing perspectives on eco-guilt and eco-shame, applying insights from moral and political philosophy and the sociology of emotions. Through this exploration, we try to nuance the discussion concerning the moral potential of eco-guilt and eco-shame. We argue that if individuals are able to break their introspective, consumption-based loops of eco-guilt and eco-shame alleviation, the emotions may enforce an individual ethical demand to be more sustainable and foster an ethical and political pro-environmental drive. Furthermore, experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame have the potential to spread socially and help catalyse emotional shifts within society, sparking a greater political and social pro-environmental movement. Therefore, eco-guilt and eco-shame may indeed transcend the purported introspective and individual-level focus and have the potential to influence broader collective and structural conditions and thus foster environmental change.

**Keywords** Environmental ethics · Guilt · Shame · Sociology of emotions · Pro-environmental behaviour · Environmental emotions

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Addressing the environmental crisis is not only a scientific, technical, and practical issue; it is a moral matter at both individual and societal level. With widespread recognition of anthropogenic climate change and other environmental problems, conversations are shifting towards sustainable strategies for environmental mitigation alongside questions of responsibility. Public and academic discussions concern the role of individuals in addressing environmental problems, whether through their role as consumers, moral agents, or citizens of democratic societies. This includes discussions concerning the appropriateness and effectiveness of placing individuals at the forefront of conversations about pro-environmental actions and sustainable solutions (Banks, 2013; Fahlquist, 2009; Scavenius, 2018). Some have highlighted that societal narratives 'portray being a good environmentalist as a solo affair' (Fredericks, 2021:88). This tendency to focus on individuals has been labelled the 'individualisation' and 'responsibilisation' of the environmental crisis (Kent, 2009; Maniates, 2001; Soneryd & Uggla, 2015).

Navigating how to behave and feel in a time of environmental crisis may involve experiencing emotions such as guilt and shame, which in this context we refer to as 'eco-guilt' and 'eco-shame' (Mallett, 2012). Guilt and shame are connected to both morality and behaviour and are therefore integral to understanding the link between emotions, morality, and sustainability. Whether eco-guilt and eco-shame lead to genuine improvements that help tackle environmental challenges is highly debated. Many studies build on the assumption that one or both emotions can function as a self-regulating mechanism leading to pro-environmental behaviour (Amatulli et al., 2019; Elgaaied, 2012; Mallett, 2012; Rees et al., 2015). This often includes adopting more sustainable consumption as a form of ethical consumerism, driven by an individual's values (Gjerris et al., 2016). At the same time, however, many maladaptive and environmentally harmful reactions to the emotions have been identified, including anger, defensiveness, denial, and suppression (Chang, 2012; Mkono & Hughes, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2024; Norgaard, 2011).

Discussions about the environmental effects of eco-guilt and eco-shame within the fields of philosophy and sociology are limited, but with some notable exceptions (e.g. Claeys, 2020; Fredericks, 2021; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017b; Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021). However, recent philosophical work has offered perspectives on these emotions, for example, environmental ethicist Elisa Aaltola defends the moral value of eco-guilt and particularly eco-shame, arguing that the emotions can spur individual moral reflection capable of fostering pro-environmental change. Meanwhile, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek states that emotions like eco-guilt maintain individuals in introspective, consumerist loops, making them focus inwardly rather than demanding structural changes. These two points of view may appear to be irreconcilable, but we believe that further investigation into the moral and social underpinnings of eco-guilt and eco-shame can help qualify our understanding of the emotions. The aim of this paper is to nuance the discussion about the possible pitfalls and moral potential of eco-guilt and eco-shame. To do this, we examine the arguments put forth by Aaltola and Žižek and discuss them in relation to moral and political philosopher Simon Critchley's 'ethics of commitment' (2007) and perspectives from the sociology of emotions, notably Ian Burkitt's 'emotional reflexivity' (Burkitt, 2012). We argue that while under specific conditions both eco-guilt and eco-shame can drive pro-environ-

mental change that transcends the individual, the emotions do engender significant challenges that must be addressed. We consider how the emotions may overcome the challenges highlighted by Žižek, thereby paving the way for not only individual, but also collective and structural pro-environmental change.

To achieve this aim, we adopt an interdisciplinary perspective. We draw on the most prevalent philosophical and psychological definitions of guilt and shame and discuss the potential of eco-guilt and eco-shame by drawing on political and moral philosophy. We have adopted our understanding of emotions as fundamentally social and interpersonal phenomena from the field of sociology of emotions.

We devote equal attention to exploring eco-guilt and eco-shame, recognising guilt and shame as two frequently interconnected moral emotions, as proposed by Sánchez (2014). As will become evident, Critchley only addresses guilt, Žižek only speaks about eco-guilt, and Aaltola mainly concentrates on eco-shame and to some degree eco-guilt. When discussing the views of Critchley and Žižek, we will apply their insights concerning (eco-)guilt in relation to both eco-guilt and eco-shame. We argue for doing so based on the theoretical definitions of guilt and shame (see Section "Guilt and Shame").

Finally, because emotions are inseparable from the sociocultural context in which they are experienced, we would like to stress that we discuss eco-guilt and eco-shame in the context of the Global North. This is crucial for these particular emotions given the historical imbalances between the main contributors to environmental issues (Global North) and those facing the most severe consequences (Global South). This is likely to affect whether and how the emotions are experienced in different parts of the world. For example, recent studies indicate that individuals in the Global South particularly tend to assign blame for environmental problems to those in the Global North, while individuals in the Global North feel less comfortable with the emotions, often perceiving guilt as unproductive (Aaltola, 2021; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017b; Norgaard, 2011).

## How Eco-Guilt and Eco-Shame Entered Modern Life

### Environmental Emotions

The societal and academic attention paid to eco-guilt and eco-shame reflects a greater tendency to focus on emotional responses to living at a time with tremendous environmental problems and the mitigation of or adaptation to these. While current literature often focuses on climate change-related emotions and uses the general term 'climate emotions' (e.g. Coppola & Pihkala, 2023; Mosquera & Jylhä, 2022; Neckel & Hasen-fratz, 2021), we use 'environmental emotions' as a broad overarching term. The awareness of these environmental emotions may be explained by people's increasing use of their emotions to navigate the complexities of modern times (Archer, 2007; Holmes, 2010). According to sociologist Archer (2007), people reflexively engage with the world to make meaning of their lives, and this reflexivity is, in addition to being cognitive and embodied, also emotional (Holmes, 2010). Therefore, people have generally become more emotionally reflexive (Holmes, 2010:147) and more

used to showing and speaking about emotions (Jacobsen, 2022, 2023) due to a general 'emotionalisation of society' (Jacobsen, 2023:15). This also includes environmental emotions (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017a; Landmann, 2020). As our emotions are related to how we intend or chose to behave and vice versa (e.g. Barbalet, 1998; Hochschild, 1979; Thoits, 1989), we may learn more about how to promote pro-environmental behaviour by studying environmental emotions.

## Guilt and Shame

Efforts to define and distinguish guilt and shame come mainly from the fields of philosophy and psychology. Guilt and shame are classified as self-conscious emotions or emotions of self-assessment (M. Lewis, 2008; Tangney & Fischer, 1995; Taylor, 1985; Tracy et al., 2007). The emotions occur when an individual believes they have somehow failed to meet personal and societal standards and have violated the social and moral norms of the group to which they belong. Guilt and shame are part of a family of emotions labelled 'moral emotions', which also includes emotions such as pride and embarrassment (Haidt, 2003). They are classified as 'moral' because they function as an 'emotional moral barometer' (Tangney et al., 2007), providing either punishments, as with guilt and shame, or reinforcements, as with pride. Since experiences of both guilt and shame are often highly uncomfortable, a fundamental aspect of these emotions is a desire to avoid or alleviate them. They thereby function as tools for self-regulation in accordance with social and moral codes (Haidt, 2003; Taylor, 1985; Williams, 1993).

In the literature, the emotions are often distinguished according to four interconnected distinctions (Aaltola, 2021). The first distinction, which is particularly influential in psychological literature, concerns whether the object of one's negative evaluation concerns behaviour (guilt) or selfhood (shame) (e.g. Bruhn, 2018; Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In other words, the experience of guilt focuses on the idea that one's *behaviour* is wrong, while with shame, there is an existential sense of *being* wrong (Lewis, 1971). Secondly, guilt is defined as having more of an *interpersonal* focus (Baumeister et al., 1994), as one feels bad for having harmed someone or something in the external world, while shame is more *self-directed* and focused on negative consequences for one's social self (Gilbert, 2003; Lewis, 1971). However, both emotions are inherently social and relational experiences focused on the negative effects that social and moral violations have on others or in the eyes of others (whether actual, imagined, or internalised). Thirdly, guilt is evoked by an *internal* judge, while shame is evoked by an *external* judge, often exemplified as the voice of one's own conscience in guilt and the critical gaze of others in shame (Benedict, 1946; Maibom, 2010; Williams, 1993). This is connected to the fourth distinction, namely that with guilt, one feels bad for having *failed one's moral ideals*, while with shame, one feels bad for *failing societal ideals* and thereby harming one's own place in the social hierarchy (Taylor, 1985). These dichotomies offer a convenient way to approach eco-guilt and eco-shame, but it is important to keep in mind that there is a risk of oversimplification in the distinctions between guilt and shame because they often operate in the same emotional territory, making the boundaries between them blurry and complex (Sánchez, 2014).

Due to the important distinction that guilt concerns specific behaviours, while shame is existential, several psychological studies argue that the feeling of guilt is less harmful, while shame can be paralyzing and trigger negative and defensive reactions such as withdrawal and anger (e.g. Gilbert, 2003; Nussbaum, 2004; Tangney, 1995). Therefore, shame is generally considered to be maladaptive. While reactions to guilt remain a topic of debate, it is generally considered adaptive and a more productive tool for inducing prosocial behaviour, as it leads to reparative actions (Gilbert, 2003; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney & Fischer, 1995). However, more recently, some scholars have defended using shame as a productive way of changing behaviour, arguing that no emotion is inherently adaptive or maladaptive. Instead, this is determined by how one manages and copes with the guilt and shame, and subsequently modifies one's goals and interactions (Dempsey, 2017). From this perspective, shame can also be prosocial, in that reparation is mediated by a motivation to manage reputation and restore a positive self-view and social self (Arneson, 2007; de Hooge, 2012; Maibom, 2010; Williams, 1993).

## The Demand to be Sustainable

The definitions of guilt and shame highlight just how closely linked the social and moral aspects of guilt and shame are. Behaviour that is generally considered morally appropriate and therefore avoids triggering guilt and shame is achieved through conformity to social and one's own moral norms. Importantly, such moral norms are not static, and neither are the transgressions that trigger guilt and shame. As environmental issues are increasingly perceived to be of grave importance, the belief that individuals 'ought' to be more sustainable, along with environmental emotions such as eco-guilt and eco-shame, are becoming more prevalent (Aaltola, 2021; Mosquera & Jylhä, 2022).

We may further understand this moral obligation to be more sustainable through moral and political philosopher Simon Critchley's work on an 'ethics of commitment', in which Critchley highlights a link between guilt, selfhood and the idea of the 'good'. He states:

> What has taken place here is that the ethical subject I have chosen to be enters into conflict with the self that I am, producing a divided experience of self as self-failure (…) [T]he phenomenon of guilty conscience reveals – negatively – the fundamentally moral articulation of the self. Namely, that ethical subjectivity is not just an aspect or dimension of subjective life, it is rather the fundamental feature of what we think of as a self, the repository of our deepest commitment and values. Ethical experience presupposes an ethical subject disposed toward the approved demand of its good. (Critchley, 2007:22–23)

The self is shaped and becomes an 'ethical subject' as it willingly binds itself to the demand of the 'good' (Critchley, 2007:20). This demand, which arises in relation to the other, is the infinite and unfillable demand around which the ethical self is constructed (Critchley, 2007). When the self breaks with its understanding of good, it triggers guilt as this 'divided experience of self as self-failure' (Critchley, 2007:22).

Although Critchley only speaks about guilt, the same dynamic that he introduces can also explain the experience of shame. What is central in Critchley's description is that the emotion is triggered by the experience of violating what social norms and one's own moral norms define as 'good', which applies to both guilt and shame. Furthermore, the very definition introduced earlier—of shame's existential focus—comes close to Critchley's description of how failing in the idea of 'good' and 'the self I want to be' produces a 'divided experience of self as self-failure'. Drawing on Critchley, we argue that in a world where environmental problems are defined as the greatest challenge of this generation (Amnesty International, 2019; UN PRESS, 2021), and where sustainability is considered such a morally and socially defined 'good', the demand to be sustainable is the gate through which eco-guilt and eco-shame enter modern life.

## Two Contrasting Views on the Effects of Eco-Guilt and Eco-Shame

The contrasting perspectives on the pro-environmental effects of eco-guilt and eco-shame, and in particular the emotions' moral potential versus their inherent introspection, which risk hindering structural progress, remains underexplored in academic discussions. In the following section, we first explore the perspective that eco-guilt and eco-shame offer a morally constructive potential, before moving on to the criticism.

### The Moral Potential of Eco-Guilt and Eco-Shame

Environmental ethicist Elisa Aaltola is among the few researchers who have examined the moral *potential* of eco-guilt and eco-shame, albeit using the terms 'climate guilt' and 'climate shame' (Aaltola, 2021). Aaltola argues that both eco-guilt and eco-shame are morally constructive emotions that can motivate reparative action or otherwise lead to more pro-environmental behaviour. Concerning eco-guilt, Aaltola argues that the emotion fosters an awareness of one's environmental 'mistakes' and motivates more sustainable choices as it promotes environmental consciousness, responsibility, and a commitment to eco-friendly reparative behaviours. In short:

> [C]limate guilt surfaces as a morally constructive emotion, capable of making us aware of the mistakes in, say, overuse of fossil fuels and animal-based foods, and able to motive us to do better in the future. (Aaltola, 2021:8)

Due to an increased acknowledgement of (eco-)guilt as a morally beneficial emotion, Aaltola primarily advocates for recognition of the moral potential of eco-shame. She contends that despite the prevalent criticism concerning maladaptive behavioural responses to eco-shame, the emotion can serve as an ethical catalyst, fostering more environmentally responsible behaviour, much like eco-guilt. Returning to the distinction that guilt is focused on behaviour, whereas shame is focused on self, Aaltola challenges the idea that shame is inherently more antagonising and paralysing than guilt (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Weil, 2002). Drawing on thinkers such as Bernard

Williams, Aaltola instead posits that because shame pertains to the self, it may reach another type of moral potential in the environmental context:

> In relation to everyday environmental ethics, this difference has obvious implications. Guilt can guide one to fly less, buy less, or eat less red meat, but shame can provoke one to question one's wider relationship with the natural environment. What is "humanity" and its relation to the rest of the world? What is the relation between "the human self" and non-human beings and entities? Why do I define my "self" in a particular way, and how does this impact how I treat the world around me? (Aaltola, 2021:6)

To Aaltola, both eco-guilt and eco-shame may therefore motivate moral reflection and evoke virtue ethical questions such as 'am I virtuous in my dealings with the environment?' (Aaltola, 2021:19). Drawing on Aristotle and Aquinas, she states that shame holds a 'pedagogic power', deterring individuals from committing shameful vices and instead guiding them towards virtue (Aaltola, 2021:13). While Aaltola acknowledges the many potential negative behavioural consequences of eco-shame, she argues that a certain type of eco-shame—'moral climate shame'—can overcome these challenges (Aaltola, 2021:18). This would include 'meet[ing] shame in a more constructive manner capable of fostering moral growth' (Aaltola, 2021:15). 'Moral climate shame' necessitates 'moral maturity' (Calhoun, 2004) and humility in meeting one's own and others' environmental transgressions. Aaltola contends that by adopting such an approach, the negative behavioural reactions of eco-shame can be lessened, enabling it to be used along with eco-guilt as a pro-environmental moral compass.

The 'costs to individuals' (Aaltola, 2021:1), as well as how individuals may meet eco-shame in a virtuous manner of 'moral climate shame' are central to Aaltola's description of how eco-shame functions. She thereby focuses on how the emotion operates and affects those experiencing it at the individual level. However, she goes on to argue that individuals may actively induce eco-shame in others. Concerning this active use of eco-shaming, Aaltola concludes that we 'may even have the moral duty to shame those, who knowingly disregard other species and environmental flourishing' (Aaltola, 2021:20). This not only includes eco-shaming ordinary individuals, but also those with more environmental power, such as companies, politicians, and industry leaders. Aaltola (2021:20) argues that the urgency of the environmental crisis requires 'foundational change in industries, politics and consumer lifestyles'. Thus, while her reflections on the moral potential of eco-shame mainly concern the individual consumer, she does state that the active use of public eco-shaming can affect those with most social, political, and economic power (Aaltola, 2021:3). Therefore, she finds eco-shaming others to be justified as it provides ordinary individuals a way of exerting their influence by eco-shaming these powerful instances (Aaltola, 2021:17).

## The Distractive, Introspective Focus of Eco-Guilt and Eco-Shame

While the majority of the critique concerning eco-guilt and eco-shame focuses on immediate maladaptive reactions to the emotions, another area of criticism pertains to more indirect effects. On the topic of eco-guilt, philosopher Slavoj Žižek states:

> [T]his readiness to assume the guilt for the threats to our environment is deceptively reassuring: We like to be guilty since, if we are guilty, it all depends on us. We pull the strings of the catastrophe, so we can also save ourselves simply by changing our lives. What is really hard for us (at least in the West) to accept is that we are reduced to the role of a passive observer who sits and watches what our fate will be. To avoid this impotence, we engage in frantic, obsessive activities. We recycle old paper, we buy organic food, we install long-lasting light bulbs—whatever—just so we can be sure that we are doing something. (Žižek, 2010)

While eco-guilt may be uncomfortable, Žižek argues that it does, on some subconscious level, present a welcomed illusion, because if we feel guilty, we maintain perceived agency in the face of overwhelming environmental problems. According to Žižek, individuals either succumb to their own inaction or engage in efforts he describes as meaningless, such as adjusting personal consumption habits to be more sustainable, i.e., the 'urge to do something, even if I know it is ultimately meaningless' (Žižek, 2017). Although not explicitly stated, this yearning for agency in uncertain times might extend to eco-shame as well, since both eco-guilt and eco-shame involve a sense of having done something wrong. What an individual did or failed to do can trigger an uncomfortable sense of eco-guilt or eco-shame, but with that may come the realisation that we should have done something else, confirming that our environmental actions do matter.

Žižek argues that 'ecology is today one of the major ideological battlefields, with a whole series of strategies to obfuscate the true dimensions of the ecological threat' (Žižek, 2017). One of these strategies is to place pressure on personal responsibility, where 'each of us should do what he/she can — recycle, consume less, etc.', rather than advocating for larger systemic solutions (Žižek, 2017). Drawing on Žižek, Carrington and colleagues (2021) argue that '[t]his ideology of market-embedded morality and the responsible consumer is the most dangerous of all because it is not experienced as ideology' (Carrington et al., 2016:36). From this perspective, what is especially problematic about disparate forms of ethical consumption, including sustainable consumption, is that the economic ideology is veiled in the name of being ethical. Furthermore, Žižek finds it highly problematic that the environmental discourse places a constant pressure on individuals because, as he argues, 'I get lost in my own self-examination instead of raising much more pertinent global questions about our entire industrial civilization' (Žižek, 2017). He goes on to highlight that 'this culpabilitization is immediately supplemented by an 'easy way out' through eco-friendly acts and sustainable consumption, so that 'you no longer have to feel guilty, you can enjoy your life as usual' (Žižek, 2017). Capitalist forces, he warns,

exploit this through notions such as sustainable consumption, distracting us from focusing our attention on more global, political, and structural changes.

The same might also extend to eco-shame. In light of the environmental signalling power of sustainable consumption evidenced in marketing studies (Berger, 2019; Guo et al., 2020; van der Werff et al., 2014) and because eco-shame is especially concerned with harming one's social self, sustainable consumption seems to offer a way to avoid or alleviate eco-shame and thereby restore or affirm one's place in the social hierarchy. Therefore, while Žižek only speaks about these risks pertaining to eco-guilt, we find that his criticism also can be applied to eco-shame. Sarah Fredericks echoes this in her work on eco-guilt and eco-shame, arguing that environmental marketers, including those using eco-guilt and eco-shame, promote an individualism that distracts from the collective acts needed to address environmental problems (Fredericks, 2021:132).

## Potential for Individual, Collective, and Structural Pro-Environmental Change

Žižek and Aaltola seem to build on similar assumptions about eco-guilt and eco-shame, namely that these emotions can motivate individuals to be more pro-environmental. However, they differ in whether or not this desire results in any real pro-environmental change. In the following section, we will first discuss their contrasting perspectives on whether eco-guilt and eco-shame have moral potential or rather keep individuals in meaningless, introspective consumerist loops. Secondly, we will discuss whether—regardless of any moral potential at the individual level—the introspective nature of the emotions prevents greater structural pro-environmental changes. We argue that eco-guilt and eco-shame do, under certain conditions, have the potential to lead to not only individual, but also collective and structural pro-environmental change.

### Eco-Guilt and Eco-Shame as Ethical Driving Forces

We start by discussing the notion of introspective passivity and loops of sustainable consumption involved in experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame. To do so, we return to the ethics of Simon Critchley. Both Critchley and Žižek share the view of a split subject, structured around its impossible aspiration to become whole (Critchley, 2007; Žižek, 1989). In our reading of Žižek, we encounter a critique of the subject's introspection, passivity, and tendency to look for a consumption-based 'easy way out' of experiencing eco-guilt and eco-shame. Meanwhile, for Critchley, the desire to become whole takes the form of an infinite ethical demand that becomes an ethical driving force crucial to the formation of the ethical subject (Critchley, 2007:13). Critchley's view suggests that we can understand eco-guilt and eco-shame as fundamental to the experience of being an ethical agent committed to the demand to be sustainable. As the agent inevitably falls short of this unfillable demand, these emotions are experienced continuously. However, as both Critchley and Aaltola argue, the emotions can be used as internal moral compasses and ethical drivers. Drawing

on Aaltola's notion of moral climate shame and Critchley's argument that guilt negatively reveals the moral articulation of the self (which we previously argued was also the case for shame), we find that eco-guilt and eco-shame have the potential to be morally and existentially formative, rather than merely lulling individuals into a state of inaction or superficial pro-environmental behaviour. This is the case when individuals use the emotions to spur environmental moral reflection about their desired behaviour and the type of person they want to be in the environmental context.

Inspired by Critchley, we support the idea that the demand to be sustainable and the moral introspection this includes can take the form of an active ethical drive instead of rendering one distracted and inactive, which aligns with Aaltola's argument that eco-guilt and eco-shame can be morally constructive. However, it is also imperative to acknowledge the concerns raised by Žižek, whose critique highlights that the demand to be sustainable may lead us astray because the economic ideology of sustainable consumption is veiled in the name of being ethical. While we disagree with Žižek's notion that individuals' efforts to shift towards more sustainable consumption is meaningless—after all, basic goods must be purchased to sustain life, and these goods could well be produced under more environmentally, socially, and economically benign conditions—we acknowledge the potential pitfalls of conflating market economics with moral issues. Crucially, this includes that companies with economic goals come to affect or define individuals' moral goals concerning the environment. Consequently, the ethical drive and demand to be more sustainable, along with the emotions of eco-guilt and eco-shame are vulnerable to exploitation by market-based interests. This increases risks such as greenwashing, the legitimisation of continuous eco-guilt- and eco-shame-free consumption, and an individual perception of 'doing enough' solely through purchasing decisions, which may ultimately be insufficient in tackling environmental problems, given the ultimate economic goal of growth (Carrier, 2010; Carrington et al., 2016; Fredericks, 2021; Klein, 2015).

For these reasons, it is important that individuals committed to the demand to be sustainable are aware of the risk that their ethical drive can—intentionally or unintentionally—be misled. Non-critical consumption of products marketed as sustainable solutions may end up bypassing the morally constructive aspects of eco-guilt and eco-shame, suggested by both Aaltola and Critchley, namely their ability to spur moral reflection about potentially more transformative pro-environmental change. In practice, if consumers are to avoid these risks, they may need to consider whether they are caught in eco-guilt- or eco-shame-triggered loops, resorting to supposed sustainable consumption as a way of buying environmental indulgence and absolution, instead of using the emotions to spur such reflection. Furthermore, we argue that this reflection should include being critical of the motives of those who stand to profit from one's experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame, including those offering sustainable products. However, this is no easy task, as it will likely require significant efforts including both heightened self-awareness and learning about the specific products, companies, industries, etc., supported through one's consumption choices.

## Transcending Introspection towards Collective and Structural Change

If we are to overcome the second part of the critique about eco-guilt and eco-shame, namely that their passive introspection deters us as individuals from focusing on the more fundamental structural conditions, we must recognise that individuals are not *only* consumers. Individuals are also citizens, and this carries significant implications for sustainability (Gjerris et al., 2016; Trachtenberg, 2010). As citizens, individuals are recognised as having rights as well as responsibilities and agency beyond their consumption choices (Dobson & Bell, 2006; Gjerris et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2023). This citizen perspective emphasises civic engagement, collective action, and advocacy for systemic change (Gjerris et al., 2016; Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007), which are exactly what Žižek argues are hindered by emotions like eco-guilt and eco-shame. However, experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame—and the reaction of morally reflecting upon one's desired pro-environmental behaviour and way of being—could include reflecting on one's opportunities for action as a citizen, rather than solely as a consumer. Recognising one's environmental responsibility in a way that goes beyond consumption choices seems to imply that the task of being sustainable becomes even greater for individuals, and thus may constitute a less likely situation. According to Žižek, the very allure of consumption-based eco-guilt or eco-shame alleviation is that it presents a quick and easy way of going back to living life as usual. However, if an individual is able to embrace the role of citizen, the emotions might lead to a greater focus on necessary structural changes. Moreover, if the emotions spur reflection about one's responsibility and opportunities for pro-environmental change, they might also facilitate engagement in collective action and/or environmental politics.

As described earlier, Aaltola touches upon the link between eco-shame and institutional and political change as she argues for the potential in publicly eco-shaming politicians, governments, industry leaders, etc. However, this pro-environmental potential in eco-shaming those with the most environmental power only concerns the shaming of others and not the individual experience of eco-shame. Therefore, if we follow Žižek's concerns, Aaltola's account of the political potential of eco-shaming does not overcome the risk that the introspective focus of individual experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame will overpower and hinder individuals turning their attention towards changing structural conditions. Nonetheless, by drawing on Critchley, we will argue that there are ways in which individuals' experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame may contribute to mobilising political pro-environmental engagement, which in turn may affect more structural conditions of society. Critchley argues that ethical demands should orient political behaviour. One of the starting points of his book is a sense of political disappointment, as he argues that we meet the injustice of the modern world with 'eyes wide shut', which he refers to as 'a motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democracy' (Critchley, 2007:39). To deal with this deficit, Critchley argues that we need a motivational *theory* that includes ethical demand and political resistance. In terms of how this political resistance may arise, he states:

> [R]esistance begins by occupying and controlling the terrain upon which one stands, where one lives, works, acts and thinks. This needn't involve millions of people. It needn't even involve thousands. It could involve just a few at first.

> Resistance can be intimate and can begin in small affinity groups. The art of politics consists in weaving such cells of resistance together into a common front, a shared political subjectivity. (Critchley, 2007:144)

It is easy to view the reaction to the environmental crisis as an example of such a motivational deficit in society, indicating that in order to overcome the passivity and inaction highlighted by Žižek, we need not only an ethical drive but also a political drive. According to Critchley, political engagement may begin at the local level but can ultimately build to challenge the political status quo.

The ethical demand originating from 'the other', is described as a synthesis of not only ethical but also political and sociocultural dimensions (Critchley, 2007:120). Perspectives from the field of sociology of emotions can help shed light on how this demand to be sustainable may spread socially via emotions like eco-guilt and eco-shame. Within this field, and especially concerning 'emotional reflexivity' (Burkitt, 2012; Holmes, 2010), researchers have explored how emotions are communicative and expressive signals of value. As Ian Burkitt argues, 'feelings and emotions are to do with our relationships to other people and things within our lives, and to the various situations in which we are constantly located' and they 'tell us something about their relevance and how they affect us' (Burkitt, 2018:2). Therefore, emotions always carry implicit or explicit meaning and value, both socially (i.e. they inform us about the value of things based on the emotions they evoke in others) and personally (i.e. we evaluate whether our emotions align with our desired identity in the eyes of others and ourselves). Consequently, when experiencing emotions, 'we are expressing value of the thing (person, object, or situation) to which we are related and thus, something of the quality of our relationship to it' (Burkitt, 2018:2). In signalling that harming the environment is something we feel bad about, we communicate the significance of the environment to others. In one interpretation, this kind of social signalling of environmental emotions may only be used superficially to signalise awareness of pro-environmental social norms, while it in reality has nothing to do with how people genuinely feel or choose to behave. In another interpretation, however, we argue that the nature of guilt and shame as moral emotions implies that when we experience eco-guilt and eco-shame, we not only affirm that caring about the environment is socially appropriate, we also affirm the status of environmental problems as moral problems. In that sense, regardless of the underlying motive for sharing experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame, the emotions may contribute in terms of informing and reinforcing the ethical demand to be more sustainable.

Furthermore, emotions may arise locally and spread, influencing how larger groups of society feel. This mechanism may be explained by emotional reflexivity, where, through interactions with others, individuals learn about 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979), which guide appropriate emotional responses in different situations. If individuals detect that others feel eco-guilt and eco-shame, this not only communicates that the environment is important, but also that this is the appropriate emotional response to behaving unsustainably. Similarly, 'emotional contagion', describes how individuals 'catch' the emotions of others like catching a disease (Hatfield et al., 1993, 2014). Sarah Fredericks discusses such emotional contagion for group-based experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame, suggesting that the emotions may spread within collectives in ways that transcend individual experiences, where 'emotional contagion is a dynamic, ampliative, reinforcing process

rather than a discrete passing of emotion like a ball thrown from one person to another' (Fredericks, 2021:60). This underscores the social potential of eco-guilt and eco-shame, where the emotional experience of a few has the potential to catalyse a broader societal emotional transformation. This description of emotions highlights that eco-guilt and eco-shame can spread socially and contribute to maintaining a demand to be sustainable just as quickly as they can disappear or be replaced by other emotions. Emotions are extremely volatile, vary in intensity, and may depend on the social setting (Collins, 2004). Furthermore, considering how the ethical demand to be sustainable is something to which we must commit ourselves, it seems likely that our moral and emotional capacity to respond to such commitments will not be unlimited. Put simply, the environmental crisis might compete with other crises that are also presented to us as moral demands. Therefore, it seems likely that people will be affected by and committed to environmental issues differently at different times.

As the emotions can spread and be socially amplified, and in light of the link between emotions and behaviour, eco-guilt and eco-shame are likely—or at least in theory have the capacity—to influence not only individual behaviours but also broader collective actions. Sociologist Michael Hviid Jacobsen argues that emotions can help us explain and understand 'how and why society as such changes (and in which direction), not least because sometimes widely shared emotions and feelings may serve as the motors of social transformation' (Jacobsen, 2023:9). Emotions play a pivotal role in shaping individual political behaviour, for instance, by influencing who one votes for and supports politically (Jacobsen, 2023), as well as collective political behaviour, such as participation in social movements and political protests (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Flam & King, 2005; Goodwin et al., 2001; Hall, 2009). This suggests that eco-guilt and eco-shame may serve as motivational factors in increasing one's involvement in environmental politics, for instance, by supporting environmentally-friendly political parties or engaging in environmental activism.

Moreover, emotions play a pivotal role in driving political action as they 'keep political passions alive' (Berezin, 2002:49), where shared emotions 'collectively bind people together towards the common goal' (Berezin, 2002:45). This underscores the importance of social engagement with other like-minded individuals who can keep each other emotionally and politically engaged towards common pro-environmental goals, even when environmental emotions such as eco-guilt and eco-shame may fluctuate. Similarly, Critchley argues that political mobilisation cannot occur without a common front or collective will (Critchley, 2007:91,102). Considering these insights about emotions and political behaviour from the field of sociology of emotions alongside Critchley's perspective that political engagement and ethical demand are intertwined, as well as our assertion that eco-guilt and eco-shame can amplify the demand to be sustainable, we suggest that the emotions possess an environmental signalling power and a political potential capable of shifting the individualised focus to more structural conditions in need of pro-environmental change.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the moral potential of eco-guilt and eco-shame, asking whether these emotions hinder or motivate pro-environmental change at the individual as well as collective and structural level. It has been argued by environmental ethicist Elisa Aaltola, among others, that the emotions have a moral potential, thus highlighting their capacity to trigger self-reflection and pro-environmental behaviour. This view has been heavily challenged by other scholars, including Slavoj Žižek, who argue that the introspective nature of emotions like eco-guilt and eco-shame and the capitalistic highjacking of such emotions may lead people astray as they focus only on quick consumption-based eco-guilt and eco-shame alleviation, distracting them from focusing on supposedly more fundamental and critical structural conditions. We have acknowledged this risk. However, by drawing on the work of ethicist Simon Critchley, we have argued that this challenge might be overcome, as eco-guilt and eco-shame can strengthen the ethical demand to be sustainable – not only at the individual level, but also at the collective and political level. Individuals can use the emotions in morally-formative ways to spur reflection about their own role in relation to environmental problems. Thereby, the demand may become an ethical and in turn political driving force that has the potential to transcend individualistic consumerist responses to eco-guilt and eco-shame. Furthermore, by including perspectives from the field of sociology of emotions, we have presented further mechanisms suggesting that eco-guilt and eco-shame have the ability to spread and amplify socially, thus contributing to an increased collective—and even societal—awareness of environmental issues.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests**  The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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