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The Virtues of Green Marketing

A Constructive Take on Corporate Rhetoric

Erik Bengtson
Oskar Mossberg

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PROLOGUE

Some time ago, a man was walking down the street. A nice, normal man. Let's call him John—that's a nice, normal name. John was on his way home from work. As he walked down the busy city streets, he could not help but notice the billboards, signs, and posters advertising "green" products and services. It seemed "green" marketing was everywhere. It had started to invade his email, his phone, really all of his different apps. Indeed, he felt it was starting to pervade his reality. He could not escape it. He would get advertisements for electric cars, solar panels, eco-friendly cleaning products. When he would look at clothes, the fabrics would be "eco-friendly", made "with care", from "sustainable cotton", or just adorned with a label signifying how both the products and the company "cared" for "our mutual environment". Lately, everything seemed to be "for a sustainable future"; even the electricity in his sockets was from renewable sources. Or at least his provider claimed it was. (How would he know?)¹

¹One could of course argue that the authors' blatant use of normative stereotypes here is problematic. It steers the storyline in certain directions, appeals to culturally valorized narrative scripts, and reproduces a number of hierarchical normative structures (gender, anglocentrism, Global Northism, and other subjects of norm criticism). And one would be right. However, most normative frameworks for evaluating communication work with stereotypes. In law, as well as in marketing, this is often explicitly so: To ensure the "objectivity" of evaluation, the contents of a message will tend to be understood from the perspective of a *constructed* addressee, often in the form of a stereotyped character (an average consumer in a particular sector, a bonus pater familias, a reasonable person, etc.) more or less situationally placed in the position of a possible actual addressee. The stereotype here is meant to be obvious—parodical even—and as will become clear throughout the book, the need for better ways of constructing the recipients of communication is a major theme of this book.

Now, John was a reasonably socially aware person, as interested in protecting the environment and battling climate change as any of us. Of course, he thought it was a good idea to do what you can, to contribute to the common good. He knew we needed to protect the environment, and he had a feeling that public concern about climate change was rapidly growing. He therefore felt responsible to do his part. As long as it was not too much of an inconvenience, or cost too much extra.

Until recently, however, John had never really thought about how *intensely* businesses were trying to market themselves as environmentally friendly, as green. As he continued on his walk, he noticed more and more green marketing everywhere he looked. John couldn't help but wonder what it all meant. Were businesses just jumping on a trend to make money? To John, this seemed likely. Or were these companies genuinely committed to protecting the environment? Less likely, probably. Their green promises were rarely very transparent. As a nice, normal man, John had a hard time judging what the green claims actually meant. What does it even mean that something is made "with care"? Or that electricity has a certain "origin"—can you even prove that? And how does this or that percentage of renewable or recycled materials in a product compare to other products in the same category? This is what John thought about during his walk. He made a mental note to do some research when he got home.

And so, he did. As a nice, normal man, John started his research by using the Delphian Oracles of our time (i.e. Google and Wikipedia) and what he thus found was ... disturbing. In no way was he the first to react to the veritable onslaught of green marketing. There were loads of information, discussions, opinion pieces, criticisms, of both a scientific and a more popular variety, with statistics, storytelling, experiments, and evidence both empirical and anecdotal. He was a bit overwhelmed. Apparently, there were even *awards*. Both genuine ones for successful green marketing efforts and ironic ones, for seemingly cynical tactics of rhetorical manipulation, called "greenwashing awards".

Now, "greenwashing" was a concept he found to be particularly interesting as it confirmed his suspicions about some of the green marketing he himself had noticed. Apparently, "greenwashing" was a term of abuse, but greenwashing practices were very prominent. Even though their environmental performance was dreadful, companies had incentives to give a green sheen—to convey the impression that their environmental work was very serious and successful. He found this disturbing. He kept on reading. For days. Weeks even. Spiraling down, down the rabbit hole, he went from

Wiki-pieces, to news articles, to critical NGO-reports. Indeed, he spiraled even deeper, and started to bore right down into the scientific discourse, on climate change, environmental communication, and environmental psychology, and found it immense and overwhelming, troublesome and disheartening, often gloomy, and at times just plain boring. He went on, via Marketing, Business, and Sociology pieces, to books literally titled “Bullshit” and works discussing “the post-truth conditions of our time”. Soon, he started to find it all downright depressing.

Now, John was as much of a liberal capitalist as the next one. He had never really thought about it, but, had anyone asked, he would probably have had good things to say about ideas like economic growth and market freedom, not to mention freedom of speech which now seemed to grant businesses a wide berth in saying whatever they wanted about their products and themselves. Regardless, he found some of the marketing practices he read about troublesome and often quite cynical.

As John grew more aware of the various sins of greenwashing, he felt his critical faculties heighten and grew better at seeing through the hokum. Soon, he grew so good at it that he was reflexively suspicious of green marketing. Indeed, he was suspicious of anything claiming to be green. John had reached a state of what some scholars had apparently called *green skepticism*, instantly mistrusting green signals. By then, he had started to be turned off by the whole concept of sustainability and to develop a rather dystopian world view, where he felt that nothing could be trusted and that nothing much mattered anyway as we were all racing toward our own annihilation. It seemed that—even though most anyone knew that something needed to be done, and many claimed to know exactly what needed to be done—nothing was happening. Despite widespread environmental concerns and mountains of green promises, inertia remained, as we kept consuming more than our planet can sustain. And so, John grew cynical.

One morning, after having his breakfast serving of despairingly bleak reports on the state of the art, John went out to walk to work. He was distracted, and as he was crossing the street a laundry truck (“Save water—let us do your laundry!”) smashed into him. It hit hard. The impact sent him flying through the air, until he landed headfirst on the pavement. As you can understand, John was hurt severely. He fell into a coma.

In his comatose state, and possibly aided by the cocktail of medicines his doctors prescribed, his mind seemed to race, as if it was still processing his days of late. In a dream most vivid, John experienced a world as he

desired, but had not himself been able to imagine while awake. He dreamt of a world where there was less cynicism, where greenwashing had subdued, and actors took responsibility, acted prudently, and were open, honest, and transparent about their environmental impact. A world where regulatory and market practices had developed to support the much-needed climate action, where green marketing had the virtue of supporting better choices, and where green promises actually meant something. In short, John dreamed of a utopia and a modern society that had started to use all tools available to seriously tackle climate change.

In fact, John's comatose state persists to this day. The brain waves of his EEG suggest he is still dreaming. Personally, we like to think he is in a better place. Considering our own situation, however, it seems prospects are darker. Judging from most contemporary accounts, John's utopia is the stuff of dreams rather than something we can bank on for our own future. Nevertheless, this book is a rough sketch, of a small aspect of something that could contribute to changing the state of the art, to work toward realizing something like John's dream. Missing our imagined friend, we write in the hopes that he will not only wake up, but that he will be able to awaken to a brighter future.

PREFACE

This book—*The Virtues of Green Marketing*—is intellectually and textually an entirely co-authored project. The ideas presented have been shaped in an ongoing dialogue between us and put into words in a shared process of text production. We have shaped each chapter and every passage together. In fact, cloud technology has enabled us to write simultaneously in a shared document. Hence, we bear equal responsibility for the research presented, just as we share the joy in noting that extraordinary people—like you—take an interest in what we have to say.

At its best, scholarly work is teamwork. We want to thank the Department of Law, the Department of Literature, and the Centre for Integrated Research on Culture and Society (CIRCUS) at Uppsala University, as well as the Section of Rhetoric, at Södertörn University, for their institutional and intellectual support, as well as encouragement. We also thank our funder, the Swedish Energy Agency and their research program Human, Energy Systems and Society (MESAM) for enabling us to pursue this line of research.

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction: A New Framework for Green Marketing	1
	1.1 <i>Sins and Virtues</i>	1
	1.2 <i>Positioning and Some Key Concepts</i>	3
	1.3 <i>Overview of This Book</i>	7
	References	10
2	A Constructive Turn: Toward Harnessing the Potential of Green Promises	13
	References	16
3	Institutional Theory and Green Legitimation	19
	3.1 <i>Organizational Legitimacy</i>	19
	3.2 <i>The Institutional Paradigm</i>	22
	3.3 <i>Some Strategies for Gaining Legitimacy</i>	24
	References	27
4	Attempts at Co-reading Institutional and Rhetorical Theory	31
	4.1 <i>Further Correlating Legitimacy Theory and Ethos Analysis</i>	31
	4.2 <i>The Aristotelian Paradigm—Dominant Albeit Deficient</i>	34
	4.3 <i>Appearances, Doxa, and the Amorality of Rhetoric</i>	37
	References	39

5	Revisiting the Rhetorical Tradition and Acquainting Ourselves with the Virtuous Orator	41
5.1	<i>Isocrates: Rhetorical Action for the Civic Good</i>	41
5.2	<i>Cicero on Harmonious Propriety, and Quintilian on Character Development</i>	44
5.3	<i>Lessons from Classical Rhetoric</i>	46
	<i>References</i>	48
6	From the Sins of Greenwashing to the Virtues of Green Marketing	51
6.1	<i>Taking Stock: The Traditional Virtues</i>	51
6.2	<i>Developing the Scheme: Flipping the Sins</i>	54
6.3	<i>Green Marketing as Climate Communication</i>	58
	<i>References</i>	63
7	Some Implications for Law	65
7.1	<i>On Possible Venues for Legal Development</i>	65
7.2	<i>Regulatory Development Is Only Part of the Solution</i>	69
	<i>References</i>	71
8	The Framework of Virtue Critique	73
8.1	<i>Introduction</i>	73
8.2	<i>Analytical Principles for Virtue Critique</i>	74
8.2.1	<i>Principle 1—The Principle of Situationality</i>	74
8.2.2	<i>Principle 2—The Principle of Multiple Motives</i>	75
8.2.3	<i>Principle 3—The Principle of Multiple Effects</i>	76
8.2.4	<i>Principle 4—The Principle of Multiple Audiences</i>	78
8.2.5	<i>Principle 5—The Principle of Prudence and Transparency</i>	83
8.3	<i>Further Reflections on Audience Construction</i>	84
	<i>References</i>	92
9	Exploring the Virtue Framework: Environmental Labels, Clean Clothes, and Green Energy Capitalism	95
9.1	<i>Putting the Framework to Use</i>	95
9.2	<i>Ecolabels: The Strategies and Struggles of Standardization</i>	96
9.3	<i>Clean Clothes, Circular Economy, and the Speed of Fashion</i>	107

9.4	<i>Balanced Corporate Rhetoric: Challenges and Possibilities in Marketing Energy</i>	119
	<i>References</i>	136
10	Green Marketing as Manifest Performance of Ethical Judgment	141
	<i>References</i>	145
	References	147
	Index	159



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A New Framework for Green Marketing

Abstract This chapter introduces the idea, at the heart of the book, that we need a constructive turn in the rhetorical study of green marketing, as the negative focus on greenwashing can only ever be part of the solution. We elaborate on some key concepts, discuss the disciplinary position of the work, and provide an overview of the book.

Keywords Greenwashing • Key concepts • From vices to virtues • Field positioning

1.1 SINS AND VIRTUES

Vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are more capable of mixture than any other kinds of affection; and it is almost impossible to have the latter without some degree of the former.
(David Hume, Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature)

In current discussions on corporate green promises, “greenwashing” has become a paradigm. This concept is infamously ambiguous and difficult to pin down.¹ Regardless, the fact that phenomena are constantly being

¹We will comment on some key terms, including greenwashing, in Sect. 1.2.

identified as greenwashing and made the object of critical attention suggests that a lot of greenwashing is being done. We frequently see corporations and organizations chastised, even publicly shamed—called out as greenwashers. Greenwashing is seen as a vice. Indeed, it is considered a *sin*, as illustrated by the fact that “the sins of greenwashing” (TerraChoice 2009) has become a standard analytic. While acknowledging the legitimacy of much of the traditional criticism, in this book, we aim for nuance. We want to put less emphasis on the admittedly manipulative character and probable negative effects of widespread greenwashing, in order to explore the positive potential of green marketing, understood as rhetoric aimed at managing profitable customer relationships. Our aim is to provide new perspectives that enable a more constructive approach and seizes the momentum already there within the corporate practices of market economy.

The study follows several different paths. We consider theory from sociology and economics, modern rhetorical theory, marketing theory, and legal doctrine. All of this is read against a historical backdrop of classical rhetorical and philosophical teachings to identify both contrasts and intellectual overlaps, in an attempt at developing a theoretical framework for the discussion and evaluation of green promises, which can account for not only their problematic aspects, but also their possibilities. One of our more tangible contributions is extricating the virtues implied by the different greenwashing sins. The basic idea is simple: if “lying” is a sin, then “truth-telling” must be virtuous. Adjusted to our subject, if “fibbing” about the environmental footprint of a product is deemed unethical, then truthful accounts thereof must be virtuous. The sins imply *values* (e.g. the value of truthfulness), and *moral spectra*, with sinful actions (e.g. lying) on the one end, and virtuous actions (telling the whole truth, and nothing but the truth) on the other. We illustrate these spectra, and, pursuant to our constructive approach, suggest a change of focus: from sins to virtues and from policing the former to promoting the latter.

The main reason for such a spectral shift would be pragmatic. Commercial actors generally have an interest in being perceived as virtuous; it can further their sales or purchases, facilitate recruitment of qualified personnel, and generally ease their dealings with other actors, private or public. Hence, while a focus on the sins of greenwashing may provide tools for policing discourse, and thus contribute to repressing bad

behavior, a focus on virtues is better suited for mobilizing the constructive and transformative potential of the ongoing boom of green marketing. Instead of viewing green promises as an inherently problematic phenomenon, or just another form of corporate bullshit, we argue that scholars could contribute to climate transition by imagining the architecture of a more sustainable commercial system—a system where green promises constitute an integrated part of a consumer market within our planetary boundaries.

The overarching aim of this book is thus to contribute to a transition toward a more sustainable society by introducing an interpretive framework for understanding and critically assessing *green promises*, a term here defined as simply “[s]tatements intended to influence the addressees by purporting the environmental benefits of something”. We believe that such statements can have a constructive role in the transition toward sustainability, perhaps most clearly within the realm of consumer marketing, by empowering consumers to take an active part in the transition. However, the full potential of green promises can only be realized once we get a firmer grip on their various designs, functions, and effects. We need to understand their role as an integral part of a larger system. This requires work, and not only empirical work—we need rhetorical theory fit for the task.

1.2 POSITIONING AND SOME KEY CONCEPTS

What you hold in your hands is a book proposing a constructive take on corporate rhetoric, or more specifically, on corporate discourse addressing topics connected to environmental consciousness. In this section, we will briefly mention a few key concepts, and as a matter of academic positioning place the work in its context.

In an era of growing environmental and especially climate consciousness, “green” rhetoric is so widespread that it is hard to avoid, and yet, it seems to be ever growing. It takes different forms. Sustainability reports have become standard operation procedure (Makower et al. 2020; cf. Dyck and Manchanda 2021). Corporate storytelling regularly espouses how companies care, are close to nature, or promise (to try) to do better (e.g. Chap. 9, Sect. 9.3). Perhaps most prevalent of all, and the main object of this book, is how companies regularly resort to *green marketing*.

Like many concepts with a widespread use, “green marketing” can be hard to pin down. The same is true of its variant terms, such as “environmental marketing”, “sustainable marketing”, and “eco-marketing”, which are often used more or less interchangeably. The concepts are hard to pin down in part due to their uses in different contexts. Especially “green marketing” seems to have been used for different reasons and to denote different phenomena.² The term has often functioned as an underdeveloped catch-all concept, especially in non-academic discussions, but there are also more precise uses as a technical term in different academic fields, including of course marketing, law, and rhetoric, but also communication studies, sociology, and management, to name just a few. While we need to designate our research object, we wish to avoid falling prey to the impulse of trying to formulate universally applicable definitions of the strict analytical kind. Instead, we opt for a functional description of the phenomenon in question. A traditional understanding might be that green marketing refers solely to promotion or advertising of products by reference to their environmental characteristics (using terms like “environmentally friendly”, “recycled”, etc.). Such cases are indeed textbook examples of green marketing. However, in our view, green marketing can incorporate a broad range of activities, including not only promotional practices but also production process, product modification, and packaging changes, to name just a few central examples (e.g. Koenig-Lewis et al. 2014;

² Part of the reason for the ambiguity is found in the first part of the word: “Green”, which in itself merits comment. As symbols, most colors have a multitude of connotational references, the result of many different uses in different contexts over time. This is not least true of green. It has been associated with jealousy, envy, and even greed. Being the color of US-dollar bills, it is regularly invoked as the color of money—a reference reinforced by the dominance of the American pop-cultural scene. Fully in line with capitalist values, green has often been associated with success, and is often viewed as the color of balance. Decorators will note that the fact that the color is the result of mixing blue and yellow gives green traits of both, being both relaxing (like an ocean) and energizing (like the sun). The references of green will vary with the context. In our present context, the central aspect of green is of course the way it has become associated with the environment. It represents the hopes for a better future and has been associated with nature, health, growth (even economic growth), indeed with life itself, and it has become a symbol both for environmental movements and for corporations mimicking their symbolism. Green is regularly juxtaposed with black—the color of death, smog, or fossil fuels—and brown, representing dirtier, less sustainable practices (in extreme cases, there can even be implications of guilt by association, as brown is the color of fascism).

Boncinelli et al. 2023). In this sense, green marketing is, as the term signifies, a subset of marketing in the wider sense of marketing studies (e.g. Polonsky 1994; Dangelico and Vocalelli 2017, discussing the evolution of green marketing definitions). However, our perspective is not equivalent to that of Marketing scholars, typically domestic to the field of Business and Management studies. We, the authors, are scholars of rhetoric and law, and what we are interested in, and what our disciplinary tools can further, is the study of marketing as communication in a broad sense, marketing as performance, as persuasion, and as the object of normative structures. We are interested in the rhetorical characteristics and functions of the particular type of communicative act that we call green marketing.³

In some senses, green marketing is like an elephant: You don't need a definition as you will know it when you see it. Indeed, such recognition is almost a criterion for it to work as marketing, as it needs to effectively communicate that whatever is being promoted is in fact green, in order to persuade. Normally, the *telos* of green marketing as persuasion will be to facilitate that the audience enters into some form of transaction with an actor directly or indirectly constructed as green—the paradigmatic case being marketing intended to further sales of a promoted product. This is also the paradigm of the legal framework regarding marketing (see Chap. 7). However, to focus solely on such paradigmatic cases would entail a reductive analysis. It would exclude much of what is most interesting about green marketing, including most aspects related to the construction of a green ethos, which is an apparently efficient and indeed common green marketing strategy (see Chap. 3).⁴ Thus, for the purposes of this book, **green marketing** can be functionally defined as *strategic communication about qualities and performance in relation to environmental sustainability*. As corporate rhetoric regards, the object of environmental performance will normally be either a brand/company, or products, and these are our main examples. Note that this definition of green marketing is provisional, in the sense that the discussions in the book will provide

³In terms of the 4 Ps of Marketing studies, our focus is primarily on the promotional aspect, although not exclusively. This is because promotion and especially the evaluation of its ethical implications are closely related to the other aspects of the 4 Ps of marketing: promotion, product(ion), place, and price.

⁴And yes, focusing on ethos, rather than on product, can be a functional way of circumventing important parts of the regulatory framework, as will be briefly developed in Chap. 7.

more flesh to the rather boney structure of the definition, but we need to start somewhere, and the provided definition will suffice as a starting point.

This book is a result of an ongoing interdisciplinary endeavor, at the intersection of law, rhetoric, and sustainability. The work is cross-disciplinary, in the sense that we are less bothered by the traditional field demarcations of different academic disciplines, and more about our object of research. In this volume, we contribute to the field of rhetoric, and especially climate transition rhetoric, and to a better understanding of the realities to be subject to legal analysis. We do so by articulating a theoretical framework for the discussion of green marketing issues, including the analysis, criticism, typologization, and evaluation of green promises.

We use the concept of **green promises** to capture instances of green marketing that can be considered as promissory utterances (possibly subject to concrete legal effects, e.g. as contractually binding, cf. Mossberg 2023). Possible clear examples are commitments made by a company or organization to take (or to have taken) specific actions or to implement certain practices in order to minimize their environmental impact and promote sustainability (e.g. by reducing emissions, conserving natural resources, using renewable energy sources, or promoting sustainable practices throughout the supply chain). Rhetorically, a green promise is a means of demonstrating commitment to protecting the environment and appealing to those concerned about sustainability. Legally and ethically, the implications of green promises are seldom very clear. Partly, this is because the analytical frameworks can be further developed, but more often, it is a result of the intentional vagueness and ambiguity of the promises—fully in line with the prevalent greenwashing criticism.

The concept of **greenwashing** is indeed related to green marketing practice. The term is a play on the words “white washing”, metaphorically used for attempts to look better than one is, and perhaps also brainwashing, referring to the manipulation of beliefs (e.g. Dangelico and Vocalelli 2017; de Freitas Netto et al. 2020). Greenwashing occurs when poor environmental performance meets the desire to communicate positive environmental performance (Delmas and Burbano 2011), and it has often been used about operations providing environmental advertising without environmental substance, in essence about making false or misleading claims about green issues. We will return to the concept of greenwashing (inter alia in Chap. 2).⁵

⁵ See also note 8.

There are more concepts which could be considered key concepts of this book, including **corporate rhetoric** (which we conceive widely, as any form of signifying behavior hailing from companies, businesses, or other actors, especially in the economic sphere), and **environmental communication** (“the dissemination of information and the implementation of communication practices that are related to the environment”, “a broad field that includes research and practices regarding how different actors (e.g. organizations, states, people) interact with regard to topics related to the environment and how cultural products influence society toward environmental issues”, Antonopoulos and Karyotakis 2020; cf. e.g. Pezzullo and Cox 2022). We also refer to **climate transition rhetoric**, a new sub-field of rhetoric, that moves away from a traditional focus on revealing manipulative language and ideological presuppositions, toward exploring the constructive potential of rhetoric to facilitate sustainable development with a particular focus on climate-related issues (cf. e.g. Wolrath Söderberg 2020; Eise et al. 2020). Indeed, we might even define more basic terms, like *climate*⁶ or even *the environment*. However, we wish to avoid merely being caught up in a nervously defensive practice of postulating definitions and abstract analysis. While words and terminology are any author’s primary tool, and avoidance of definitional fullness leaves openings for criticisms from more analytically inclined scholars, at this point it seems more prudent to just get on with things.

1.3 OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

In ten chapters, this book introduces and explores a new framework for the analysis and discussion of green marketing. Directly following this brief introduction, Chap. 2 presents our main idea about the potentially transformative power inherent in green promises. Chapter 3 then engages

⁶And indeed, given the currently extremely prolific use of the term climate, it is an interesting concept. It seems inherently vague. In the context of climate change, it will often refer to more than just long-term meteorological patterns within a specific area, or the average physical conditions of the atmosphere. The surface temperature is rising, but usually “climate” will refer to something more, and possibly more elusive, for abstract conceptualization. “Climate” refers to something like the state of the climate system—that is, conditions in the atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere, lithosphere, and biosphere—at any given moment, and over time, and thus it refers to how the air, water, ice, land, and life are, develop, and interact with each other.

with selected research on organizational theory. Within this broad field, the question has been raised about the possible constructive effects of green promises. Researchers have also conceptualized the promises' functions, in terms of organizational ethos and legitimation processes. We engage with selected contributions in this discussion, to provide a rudimentary understanding of the concept of legitimation, and to acknowledge green legitimation as a specific form of legitimation practice that has gained momentum as climate change is being increasingly sedimented as an institution. In our view, these modern contributions to the analysis of societal phenomena have clear links to key concepts in classical rhetorical theory, especially that of *ethos*.

In Chap. 4, we search for the building blocks for a new scheme of ethos analysis, by taking stock of modern rhetorical research. We scrutinize the merits and demerits of earlier attempts to merge the legitimation perspective of institutional theory with rhetorical theory. In doing so, we strive to be particularly mindful of the often problematic ontological implications of earlier attempts to analyze corporate green rhetoric by combining rhetorical theory on ethos with organizational theory. Hence, while Chap. 3 provides a presentation of institutional theory that functions as an important frame of reference, Chap. 4 provides a critical discussion of earlier research. We note that the Aristotelian paradigm seems to be positively dominant, and while there is good reason for its popularity, as it provides useful analytical tools, it has problems and drawbacks. We illustrate this by examining some of the limitations for corporate image analysis that arise from a strict adherence to an Aristotelian paradigm.

Following the problematization, Chap. 5 launches the search for an alternative framework by mapping how the relation between rhetoric and virtue has been conceptualized within the rhetorical tradition, beyond Aristotle. By returning to the classical rhetorical tradition, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics of rhetorical practice, one that is more consistent with a dynamic understanding of institutional theory, and most importantly, works better as a framework for a constructive turn in the scholarly discussion of green marketing. We draw from historical sources, primarily Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian, but the discussions do not merely serve as a historical backdrop. Instead, the lessons drawn shape our development of a theoretical framework of green marketing virtues.

An analytical framework is then presented in Chap. 6 in the form of a typology, categorizing the sins, their corresponding virtues, and the different types of problems that they concern. This chapter thus contains the perhaps most tangible of our contributions, regarding theoretical building blocks and analytical tools for future discussions about green marketing. We believe that these tools may well prove useful in different fields. Thus, in the following Chap. 7, we discuss some of the possible legal implications of our proposed shift of focus, from censuring or chastising sins, toward cultivating virtuous action.

In Chap. 8, we focus on mapping the premises for a qualitative analysis utilizing the virtue framework and present five analytical principles to guide the scholarly work. Chapter 9 then uses the framework to examine the role of environmental labels in green marketing. We also explore various forms of corporate green promises within consumer-oriented marketing from two branches of industry, namely the clothing industry and the energy sector.

While at times we do discuss possible legal implications of the framework, the primary potential of the perspective here proposed exists on a socio-discursive level, rather than on the level of hard law. We do not deny that legal rules can be a powerful influence guiding human behavior. However, as reality should be primary to the rules purporting to regulate said reality, a robust analysis of the real problems of green marketing practice should precede regulatory development, to secure the efficaciousness of regulatory responses. Ultimately, it seems that if marketing agencies, environmental organizations, and consumers change their way of talking about and conceptualizing green marketing, this could have significant, and positive, consequences for climate transition, and it could thus contribute to a more sustainable society. We end this book, in Chap. 10, with a concluding discussion on green marketing as the performance of ethical judgment and on future interdisciplinary avenues of research.

Finally, we present a few reading recommendations. As our scholarly endeavor is interdisciplinary, and the topic treated might attract readers with varying interests and backgrounds, a few suggestions and possible shortcuts might be helpful. First of all, readers interested in getting the gist of our argument and results with as little leg work as possible could consider focusing on Chaps. 2, 6, 8, and 10 where some of the merits of a constructive turn and the basic structure of the framework are introduced.

Readers well read in institutional theory might consider skimming Chap. 3, since that chapter is primarily introductory, and aimed at readers without previous knowledge in this research tradition. For readers with a scholarly background in rhetoric, Chaps. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 might be the most interesting. Chapters 3 and 4 co-read institutional theory and research on corporate rhetoric, while Chap. 5 revisits the rhetorical tradition, bringing out its relevance for contemporary issues, and Chap. 6 provides an analytical framework. Readers interested in the legal potential of the framework can direct particular attention to Chap. 7, albeit being wary that the discussion there presupposes the discussions of the previous chapters. As Chap. 9 provides concrete examples of how the perspective can be used, it merits attention by those interested in applying the perspective introduced in their own work as analysts of green marketing, producers of it—or as policy makers. Of course, the discussion might be of particular interest to those interested in sustainable clothing or the energy sector.

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A Constructive Turn: Toward Harnessing the Potential of Green Promises

Abstract This chapter elaborates on the suggested shift of focus, from chastising greenwashing to promoting virtue. Our perspective aligns with a broader constructive turn in contemporary rhetorical studies.

Keywords Greenwashing • Green skepticism • Rhetorical criticism • Validity • Constructive turn

Research articles on green marketing often signify their relevance by describing how various forms of green marketing are on the rise and today constitute a significant part of commercial rhetoric. This trend is then described as an effect of an increased public awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis and the related need for transitioning our society (e.g. Delmas and Burbano 2011; Baum 2012; Chen and Chang 2012; Kim and Lyon 2015; Lyon and Wren Montgomery 2015; Gatti et al. 2019; de Freitas Netto et al. 2020). Indeed, there has been a veritable boom of commercial green promises. This development has also generated a corresponding amount of critical discussion. When scrutinizing these discussions, however, one can easily find them to be somewhat one-sided, as they tend to focus primarily on the lack of actual substance of commercial green promises. Such negative evaluations are commonplace both in the scientific literature and in public discourse.

This perceived lack of substance seems to be the impetus for the entire—enormous—discourse on *greenwashing*: a phenomenon which (a measure of conceptual unclarity notwithstanding, e.g. de Freitas Netto et al. 2020) has spawned discussions in many fields, both popular and academic. Greenwashing has been the subject of debate and critique in the study of rhetoric and in legal discourse, as well as in advertising, management, and organizational theory (which will all be touched upon in the following chapters). The concept has also made a significant impact on public discourse, where more and more companies are being criticized for using misleading environmental claims in their marketing, that is being accused of greenwashing. In our country Sweden, for example, the environmental group Friends of the Earth has a yearly “Greenwashing award” which is ironically awarded to an organization that excels in greenwashing. The nominations and awards receive a considerable amount of media attention and seem designed to shame and to affect the organizations’ brand negatively.

In line with this general tendency, the predominant approach within rhetorically oriented research has been to study green promises critically. This conforms to the dominant approach in rhetorical studies, as the mode of “normal science” within the field is still *rhetorical criticism* (cf. e.g. Kuypers 2016; Hart and Daughton 2015), often aimed at revealing hidden truths or at drawing out unflattering or counterintuitive meanings which others fail to see (e.g. Felski 2015). Current research has thus often presupposed the prevalence of *non-valid* and misleading green promises, viewing them as puffery or mere bluster, and as ethically questionable deception. Accordingly, rhetorical research concerned with sustainability claims has tended to be directed at exposing dishonest displays and understood as a mapping and description of manipulative greenwashing (e.g. Baum 2012; Smerecnik and Renegar 2010; Dickinson and Maugh 2004).¹ Researchers commonly frame their studies as tackling the question of whether

¹There have been different typological attempts, sorting different kinds of greenwashing. One version (Jain and Kaur 2004; cf. Dangelico and Vocalelli 2017) claims that the most common practices are: (i) *green spinning*, when a company presents its own version of environmental facts; (ii) *green selling*, which means adding some environmental benefits in a traditional product’s campaign; and (iii) *green harvesting*, when a company decreases costs thanks to a sustainable practice but sells products at a premium price to earn extra profits. Greenwashing is communication, and thus it can be accomplished in many different ways. Ross and Deck (2011) list common strategies and mention: misleading with words, with visuals/graphics, with vagueness in claims, with exaggeration, and with avoidance of helpful information. Though such lists can be helpful, they are obviously not exhaustive as, in principle, anything that can be understood as bearing a significance can be considered misleading.

environmental claims by commercial actors are the “real deal” or “mere rhetoric” (cf. e.g. Baum 2012; Scanlan 2017; de Freitas Netto et al. 2020 with further references). In other words, skepticism is the go-to starting point, and the analysis is based on a general distrust of the companies’ character.

To us, such critical approaches seem legitimate due to the innate problems of green marketing as a part of today’s unsustainable form of capitalism. (Note that we do not exclude the possibility of a sustainable form of market economy.) Indeed, greenwashing has been shown to be prevalent—as is illustrated by a much-discussed survey in which TerraChoice (2009) found that, out of 4744 “green” products in the US and Canada, 95% were guilty of greenwashing (cf. e.g. Baum 2012). Hence, there seems to be room for legitimate criticism. However, the focus on greenwashing can also be problematic, as it perpetuates and indeed encourages a sense of skepticism about the validity and legitimacy of green promises. This can lead to a backlash, as it fuels a general state of *green skepticism*, impeding environmentally beneficial behavior and possibly neutralizing sustainable motivations (Douglas 2009; Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez 2009; Chen and Chang 2013; Golob et al. 2018).

Beyond the pragmatic reasons for questioning the emphasis on skepticism in the study of green promises, one should also note that the emphasis on criticism resonates with a historically rooted criticism of rhetoric, where rhetoric is viewed as either powerful manipulation or mere flowery (on this tradition which goes back, at least, to the works of Plato, see e.g. Weaver 1953; White 1983; Vickers 1989; Kennedy 1994, or really any good textbook on the subject of rhetoric). This emphasis on the negative also resonates with the critical paradigm within the humanities more generally, which, since Ricœur, has often been referred to as or viewed as parallel to a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricœur 1965, 1969). Pursuant to this paradigm, scholars tend to question conventional truths as constructed and contingent. Rather than presenting ideas for constructive language use, they seek to reveal hidden structures of thought or power (e.g. Felski 2015; cf. Mossberg 2020). However, during the last 20 years, and gaining momentum after the debate on “post-truth” and “alternative facts”, there has been a renewed interest within the humanities in general, and within rhetoric in particular, to turn away from mere criticism (e.g. Amossy 2002; Anker and Felski 2017; McIntyre 2018; Bengtson 2019). This book is part of that movement—part of the *Constructive Turn*, which includes a growing interest in climate transition rhetoric and moves away from a traditional focus on revealing manipulative language and ideological presuppositions,

toward exploring the constructive potential of rhetoric to facilitate sustainable development (Wolrath Söderberg 2020; Joosse et al. 2020).

As this study adopts an interdisciplinary—law and rhetoric—approach, it is worth mentioning that the pragmatic approach entailed by the constructive turn fits well with the tendency of legal discourse to address practical problems through feats of social engineering. It is commonplace for lawyers to work toward developing the regulatory frameworks. In our view, regulative development constitutes an important task, and the constructive approach we propose seems to provide both theoretically interesting and practically advantageous openings for it (see Chap. 7).

In the next chapter, however, we wish to establish some points of departure for constructively investigating the productive potential of commercial green promises. We begin by sketching out a rudimentary understanding of the concept of *legitimation*. In doing so, we acknowledge that *green legitimation* is a specific form of practice which is gaining momentum as climate change is increasingly being sedimented as an institution.

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Institutional Theory and Green Legitimation

Abstract This chapter introduces legitimation studies and the institutional paradigm. It provides a conceptual framework for analyzing legitimation practices and corporate image management.

Keywords Organizational theory • Legitimacy theory • Institutional paradigm • Image and environment

3.1 ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy has been an object of interest in several different academic fields. Consequently, there are many possible reference points for our discussions. We have chosen to follow the approach of the American sociologist and lawyer Mark C. Suchman, laid out in his classic article “Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches” (1995). This perspective provides an overall picture and balances a strategic and an institution-focused understanding (cf. DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Suchman’s sociological view, combined with his background in law, also fits well with our own interest in the social dynamics and legal implications of different conceptual framings.

Turning to the substance of the legitimation theory, we could start with the premise that, to organizations, legitimacy is something highly desirable, necessitating legitimation efforts (e.g. Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott

et al. 2000). Legitimacy is not an asset in the sense of a resource to be mined from the organizations' environment and then employed in pursuit of their goals (although it has been depicted along such lines, especially in older research, cf. Suchman 1995 with references). Instead, legitimacy is by definition an incorporeal phenomenon—a cultural construct that only exists in the interactions between different subjects (e.g. Johnson et al. 2006, with further references) and which has been described as providing an organization with “justification of existence” (Maurer 1971; cf. DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Such justification, that is, legitimacy, is achieved by cultivating a perception of congruence between an actor's activities and its surrounding social environment's norms and values (Suchman 1995; cf. Wæraas and Ihlen 2009; Frandsen and Johansen 2011). (Rhetoricians will here note that there is an overlap with the idea of appealing to the *doxa* of the audience.) Organizations are thus seen as embedded in wider social environments and structured and understood (as legitimate) relative to the social and cultural standards of these environments (cf. DiMaggio and Powell 1991). In short, “legitimacy represents a relationship with an audience, rather than being a possession of the organization”.

In the article from whence this last quote is obtained, Suchman (1995) proposes an analytic with three different kinds of legitimacy, namely, pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Noting that “[a]ll three types involve a generalized perception or assumption that organizational activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions”, he goes on to differentiate between them, as they rest on somewhat different behavioral dynamics. *Pragmatic legitimacy* rests on the self-interested calculations of the organization's audiences, which means that legitimation efforts can cater to such calculations, inviting decisions favorable to the organization. *Moral legitimacy* reflects a positive normative evaluation of the organization or its activities, entailing the value of strategic communications signaling moral propriety. *Cognitive legitimacy* results from an organization's perceived comprehensibility or taken-for-grantedness. It can be achieved by “naturalizing” the organization or its activities, that is, making it seem like an understandable, coherent part of the chaotic existence of everyday life, or perhaps even as a necessary and inescapable factual entity—a given, a naturalized fact of life (cf., from the field of law, e.g. Fitzpatrick 1992; Schlag and Griffin 2019). This trifold analytic provides means of differentiating between separate aspects of an organization's relationship with its

audiences. Translated to rhetorical terms, the analytic highlights different aspects of ethos construction, all of which can in principle be exhibited to construct a green ethos.

As relationships need work, and as the need for legitimation is constant, the process of obtaining legitimacy requires continual effort. In an idealized chronology, at the outset the challenge is to *gain* legitimacy. From then on, the organization needs to *maintain* legitimacy over time, and in the event of legitimacy problems or occurring crises, try to *repair* it (Wæraas and Ihlen 2009, building on Suchman 1995; Elsbach et al. 1998; Allen and Caillouet 1994; Elsbach 1994). Different stages of the overall legitimation process involve different challenges. For example, maintaining a level of cognitive legitimacy already attained is relatively easy, demanding only limited efforts (e.g. to “stay natural”), whereas repairing moral legitimacy after an occurring crisis can demand efforts both great and long term. As will be further developed in the following section, the different kinds of legitimacy and challenges invite different strategies of legitimation.

The unremitting requirement for legitimation is partly a result of the ever-changing flow of public discourse. The dynamic, polyvocal, and sometimes temperamental discourses of late modern society inevitably put pressure on organizational legitimacy, as discourse affects social values and norms (both in the sense of rules, and of what is considered normal), effectively changing and revalorizing them over time. Legitimation is thus connected to the dynamics of public opinion, which implies that the influencing of public opinion, or sometimes the opinions of a more limited group of organizational stakeholders, can provide avenues of legitimation, or indeed in itself be a compelling indirect means of legitimation. Trying to counteract the public acceptance of climate change, for instance, can make actors otherwise seen as complicit to climate change seem more legitimate, or vice versa. However, such opinion forming is often challenging and generally necessitates coordinated efforts between different actors within a social field (Suchman 1995). There are exceptions (cf. e.g. Scanlan 2017), but, generally, it is difficult to attain the level of coordination necessary. These difficulties partly stem from the fact that actors within a field are often competitors, implementing competitive legitimation efforts (e.g. Wæraas and Ihlen 2009).

As regards the scientific analysis of legitimacy management—or, to deemphasize the strategic managerial perspective, legitimation *processes*—interesting work has been performed within sociology, not least under the

new institutional paradigm of organizational studies (see generally e.g. DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Johnson et al. 2006 with references). Research pursuant to this paradigm tends to view organizations as actors, actively “translating” and adopting the organizational “recipes” received from society to their own local context, rather than passively yielding to the normative pressure from their environments (Røvik 1998; cf. Frandsen and Johansen 2011, 2013). Performing such translations can be a potent way of achieving legitimacy. These recipes, or their “ingredients”, which are central to the idea of organizations as translators striving for legitimacy, are tied to another key concept, namely that of *institutions*, which in fact has become the common label of this theoretical perspective.

3.2 THE INSTITUTIONAL PARADIGM

Following Scott (2008), institutions can be defined as “multifaceted, durable social structures made up of symbolic elements, social activities, and material resources”, where the symbolic elements include three basic types: rules, norms, and cultural-cognitive ideas and beliefs (cf. Frandsen and Johansen 2011, 2013; Suchman 1995). Institutions are simultaneously viewed as a *product* (a specific property or state of an existing social order) and a *process*.

In the latter, procedural, sense institutions can be analyzed as a series of specific stages, for instance, as stages corresponding to a kind of “Rise and fall” of an institution, such as innovation (pre-institutionalization), habitualization, objectification (semi-institutionalization), sedimentation (full institutionalization), and de-institutionalization. In the sense of being a product, an institution can be exploited, as part of legitimation strategies. The institutions of an organization’s environment are dynamic, in the sense that they are constantly being developed (undergoing change). Despite this, in every given moment, there will be institutions available, in the sense that they can be addressed rhetorically as if they were fixed and stable.

In this context, it is interesting to note that, a decade ago, Frandsen and Johansen (2011) suggested that, from the perspective of organizational theory, the concept of *climate change* could be defined as:

a set of ideas embedded in a complex process of institutionalization which in the case of private companies materialize in action-producing initiatives such as climate strategies, climate-friendly products or production processes, and new related forms of external and internal communication.

That is, climate change can be defined as an institution influencing organizational practice, or at the very least part of a process of institutionalization—which, a decade later, can credibly be taken to have resulted in a “full”, sedimented institution, diffused throughout many different organizations and fields. Given the current upsurge of green marketing, such a conceptualization seems credible. The conceptualization is also attractive for rhetorical analysis, as organizations appeal to or mobilize the potential of institutions to obtain legitimacy. Described in rhetorical terms: Associating an organization’s image to certain institutions can be a way of constructing a persuasive ethos, and, as of now, green imagery is evidently quite prolific within corporate ethoi construction.

The concepts of ethos and image are connected to that of *identity*, which, following Røvik (1998; cf. Frandsen and Johansen 2011), can be defined as “the awareness of who you are in relation to how you perceive others are and how you believe others perceive you”. In other words, identity is largely, albeit not necessarily exclusively, about self-image. As identity is thus constructed as a relational phenomenon, it can be assessed and reshaped rhetorically through comparisons that highlight aspects of similarity or dissimilarity with other actors. Such identity construction can often be performed and discussed in terms of *imitation* of positive exemplars (e.g. actors perceived to be green) or of *differentiation* from negative exemplars (e.g. massive polluters). As this suggests, institutions can have *homogenizing* effects, partly due to imitative efforts and partly due to the fact that actors can independently adapt to the same institutions (e.g. implement the same rules), thereby becoming more alike.

These ideas about the institutionalization of climate change, about rhetorical appeals to institutionalized rules, norms, and ideas, and of the possible effects of rhetorical identity-management, are all of interest to our inquiry. They provide a perspective for studying how the external rhetoric of corporations constitutes part of their corporate identity management, among other things raising the question if organizations, in the words of Frandsen and Johansen (2011), do in fact “become what they say they are”. If, for instance, a corporation repeatedly touts its climate friendliness over an extended period, does this influence not only the public image but in fact the self-image of the corporation? Could it contribute to institutionalizing the idea of climate change and thus have a real impact on the self-understanding of the organization concerned? While Frandsen and Johansen do not provide any conclusive answers to these questions, they direct attention to the possible effects of an organization’s external

rhetoric on its identity, its internal norms, and its actions. If such questions could be answered in the affirmative, this would entail a possible, and possibly massively important, virtue of green marketing as a vehicle of climate transition.

Present research also gives some cues as to how rhetorical theory can provide means of mediating fractures between different logics and different perceptions of organizational identity, or indeed of combining them in meaningful ways. This is completely in line with a constructive tradition, casting the role of rhetoric not as a mere tool for manipulation, but as a deliberative aid that can help us make better decisions. The capacity to negotiate the friction between various perspectives is of utmost importance, since the very practice of green legitimation and green marketing contains a pervasive, and perhaps key, conflict between two different institutional logics: namely, on the one hand, the institutions of sustainability, planetary boundaries, and climate change and, on the other hand, the institutions of (late) modern capitalism (cf. e.g. Kendall 2008). For example, communications scholars Smerecnik and Renegar (2010) have shown how corporate communication can work to subordinate questions of sustainability to the capitalist paradigm, with its inherent norms, values, and forms of agency. This is a way of taming the transformation and obstructing or at least delaying progress toward sustainability. In light of this, there is need for further discussions on how green legitimation and green marketing can best be understood and possibly reshaped to face the common challenge of climate transition. Rebalancing the opposite interests emanating from these institutions might take a lot of work, but can no doubt prove constructive.

3.3 SOME STRATEGIES FOR GAINING LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy can be defined as perceived congruence between an actor's activities and the norms and values of its surrounding social environment and can be achieved in different ways. Several of the aforementioned authors have written comprehensively on legitimacy management and have provided a number of helpful distinctions. As mentioned, Suchman (1995) has proposed distinguishing between pragmatic, moral, and cognitive kinds of legitimacy, highlighting dimensions of interest, evaluation, or comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness, respectively. In addition to this, he has taken inventory of and categorized different strategies for obtaining legitimacy, thereby distinguishing a few main types of

legitimation efforts. The different strategies are conceptually tied to the different stages of the “chronology” of legitimation, that is, gaining, maintaining, and repairing legitimacy.

While Suchman provides a broad and integrative overview of the legitimacy research at the time (1995), aiming to establish more stable conceptual moorings for the legitimacy discussions in general, we will need to narrow our focus. For our present discussion on green ethos construction, the most interesting strategies are the ones suited to the effort to gain legitimacy. The strategies for maintaining, and for repairing legitimacy (largely coinciding with crisis management), are relevant for a broad understanding of green marketing and corporate green promises. They are, however, less pertinent to the key process of constructing an environmental ethos, as they largely presuppose that a certain image is already in place and only needs to be conserved or reasserted.

To gain legitimation, then, in essence, an organization can:

- A. Conform to an environment, if necessary by adapting to the dictates of a preexisting audience within the organization’s current environment (*conformative legitimation*),
- B. select a favorable environment, among multiple available environments in pursuit of an audience that will support the organization (*selective legitimation*), or
- C. try to change its environment by manipulating the social framework of its environment and creating new audiences and/or new legitimating beliefs (*manipulative legitimation*).

The different strategies present their respective challenges and opportunities and have their respective strengths and weaknesses. Conformist strategies, for example, signal allegiance to the cultural order, pose few challenges to established constitutional logics (Meyer and Rowan 1991), and do not require breaking with prevailing cognitive frames (Oliver 1991; cf. Suchman 1995). At the same time, conformism requires conformity—it requires *fit* and thus demands that any less than well-fitting organization changes to adapt to its environment, which can prove challenging given often occurring tendencies of inertia. Manipulative strategies, inversely, do not (in their pure form) require conformity or internal adaptation of the organization. Instead, they require efforts to change the external environment, which can prove to be difficult indeed. Selective legitimation in turn requires the possibility of selection, entailing both the *availability* of

multiple environments of differing favorability, and organizational *mobility*, in the sense that the organization can move between these environments. However, as the concept of “environment” allows for plasticity (cf. e.g. Scott 2005), selection need not be limited to, for example, change of geographical location or legal jurisdiction. It can also include other selection processes, such as choices regarding positioning within a market, to fall under certain norms rather than others, or to conform to certain rules while evading others.

As the previous discussion suggests, the different strategies (A–C) can be used to gain the different kinds of legitimacy, that is, pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy, respectively. Depending on which kind of legitimacy is sought, the nature of the efforts will need to vary. A standard conformist strategy of gaining pragmatic legitimacy, for instance, is to illustrate how the organization can gratify the needs of the target audience by being responsive to client needs. This strategy is well suited to symbolic action pursuant to a traditional capitalist paradigm, whereas conformity to moral ideals has often been taken to pose challenges to this paradigm—not least regarding environmental sustainability, which has often been perceived to entail a certain level of altruism (a theme we will return to in Chap. 9).

The triad (A–C) is indeed somewhat idealized. It is not a true trichotomy, as a measure of overlap between the different strategies is possible. Nor are the strategies necessarily mutually exclusive, as combined approaches are possible. It is thus quite possible for an organization to adapt to its environment while at the same time trying to manipulate it. Just as it is equally possible to select a fairly favorable environment and then either adapt to it, try to manipulate it, or indeed both, for an even better fit—maximizing organizational legitimacy. It should here be noted that manipulative legitimation, though it can be, is not necessarily “bad or dishonest”; the word “manipulative” in this context merely signifies the attempt to actively change the organizational environment (Wæraas and Ihlen 2009). It should also be noted that seemingly conformist efforts can be purely symbolic, rather than substantive. Organizations regularly assume or incorporate “institutionalized rules” about suitable behavior within their field or within society at large (Meyer and Rowan 1977; cf. Frandsen and Johansen 2011). Such assumptions may well be ostensibly professed, in a “merely rhetorical” fashion. To describe this process, organizational scholars have spoken about the *decoupling* of the rhetoric professing legitimate behavior from actual corporate praxis (ibid.; Boxenbaum

and Jonsson 2008; cf. Wæraas and Ihlen 2009). Such a disconnect between rhetoric and praxis might result from cynical opportunism, which can be a driver of greenwashing (cf. Delmas and Cuerel Burbano 2011). However, it can also be the result of the failures of good faith efforts, such as bona fide attempts at being “more green”. Despite these purely formal deficiencies, on the one hand, and the possibility of cynicism and failure, on the other hand, the triad (A–C) provides a helpful heuristic to understand green legitimization efforts and a useful tool for analyzing strategies of corporate image management in relation to normative frameworks.

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Attempts at Co-reading Institutional and Rhetorical Theory

Abstract This chapter starts bridging the gap between organizational and rhetorical studies by correlating the conceptual frameworks of the respective fields and comparing legitimacy theory with ethos analysis. Further, it critiques the dominant Aristotelian paradigm and its view of rhetoric as an amoral tool.

Keywords Ethos analytics • Temporal and social dynamics • Aristotle • Rhetorical ontology • Ethics and appearance

4.1 FURTHER CORRELATING LEGITIMACY THEORY AND ETHOS ANALYSIS

As an analytical tool, the triad of (A) conformative, (B) selective, and (C) manipulative legitimation also ties in well with the concept of ethos, as imported from the rhetorical tradition. The way we see it, ethos-construction and legitimation go hand in hand. They are not identical concepts, as they are part of different scholarly fields, traditions, and conceptual apparatuses, but they can easily be associated and correlated. This is highly relevant to the present subject, as constructing an ethos that is trustworthy in a certain context is a way of gaining legitimacy, and the triad thus enables us to differentiate between strategies of

ethos-argumentation. Before expounding on this, we however need to further develop and refine our discussion of ethos.

As already iterated, the concept of *ethos* is a central part of classical rhetoric. The word ethos (plural: ethoi) has the same root as ethics, and the rhetorical concept, conventionally traced to Aristotle, concerns the speaker's character, such as it is performed through the speech (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1356a). In the Aristotelian sense, ethos is thus a part of the discourse constructed within a rhetorical situation (cf. Bitzer 1968) through the use of speech, gestures, and other symbolic means. In modern theory, the Aristotelian sense of ethos has been called the discursive, or secondary, ethos, conceptually paired with the speakers' prior, or primary, ethos, which precedes the discursive construction of the rhetorical agent's ethos (e.g. Amossy 2001). Thus, the prior ethos is something the speaker brings with her into a rhetorical situation—in essence, her already established image—while the discursive ethos is the image she builds for herself through symbolic action within the situation.

Now, it should be noted that, in general, the rhetorical situations in which green promises occur are complex ones (a point elaborated in Chap. 8), actualizing a mixture of different discourses and possible rhetorics (e.g. Frandsen and Johansen 2011). As any comprehensive analysis needs to accommodate this complexity, we argue that it makes sense to employ the distinction between prior and discursively constructed ethoi. In addition, this distinction should not be understood as a dichotomy sharply dividing two necessarily separate categories, allowing neither a third nor any phenomena not firmly assigned to either side of the divide. Instead, it is perhaps better conceptualized as a type of sliding scale distinction. In using the sliding scale metaphor, our conceptualization takes account of the fact that discourses, and indeed rhetorical situations, can be differently delimited, in time and space, as well as in scope. They are not to be understood as given phenomena, but rather as interpretive constructs. That transitions are gradual does not, however, preclude that the distinction between a prior and discursive ethos—i.e. an ethos that should be placed closer to either end of a spectrum—provides a useful analytical tool.

The modern distinction between two forms of ethos seems to have been underemployed in contemporary scholarship on green marketing, despite the fact that it provides a helpful tool for the analysis of legitimacy and that the basic concept of ethos has been used both regularly and broadly. Wæraas and Ihlen (2009) and Frandsen and Johansen (2011), for instance, both utilize the concept of ethos in analysis of organizational

legitimation strategies and corporate identity management. However, most contributions, including these two, tend to focus on ethos as discursive ethos, leaving us with uncharted territory as to the possibilities entailed by ethos-analysis. We want to explore this territory, and further develop the possibilities of co-reading institutional legitimacy theory and rhetorical theory. Let us begin by relating the distinction between different kinds of ethoi to the aforementioned triad of legitimacy theory:

- A. *Conformative legitimation* largely coincides with constructing a discursive ethos conforming to the values and norms of the organization's environment.
- B. *Selective legitimation* entails, either, an astute use of a prior ethos, exploiting an organization's already established image upon entering a chosen (new) environment where this image is beneficial, or, that a new actor makes a clever choice of environment, where the actor can more easily construct a persuasive discursive ethos.
- C. *Manipulative legitimation*, finally, is a way of changing what is considered a trustworthy ethos, by influencing the cultural norms and values governing how corporate images are perceived.

This indicates that the scheme of different legitimacy strategies ties in well with some of the concepts of rhetorical theory. In particular, the modern distinction between prior and discursive ethos enables us to highlight fruitful connections between the teachings of rhetoric and institutional legitimacy theory. In our view, this distinction can be used to elaborate the analytical framework of green legitimation. It can thereby support the ambition to illuminate the rhetorical or discursive dimensions of green legitimation processes. The distinction enables us to account for the fact that legitimation processes have a *dynamic* aspect, in both a social and temporal sense. It is important not to reduce the rhetorical analysis of legitimation to a study of texts as isolated and atemporal artifacts. In merging the scheme of legitimacy strategies with a contemporary understanding of ethos, we structure the observed phenomena as part of a social dynamic which, as we will show later on, also furthers a constructive approach. While they are forerunners in highlighting the rhetorical dimension of green legitimation processes, the referenced articles by Frandsen and Johansen and Wæraas and Ihlen do not thematize this dynamic quality of ethos, at least not in a way that best utilizes the rich contributions of the rhetorical tradition. This is understandable, as they are able to reach their

direct objectives anyway, but it means that rhetoric is conceptualized in an unnecessarily narrow way, as basically verbal expressions designed to influence. Such a construction of rhetoric is fully in line with an Aristotelian tradition, but in Chap. 5 we explore a different rendering of rhetoric, which better serves to account for what we consider to be essential aspects of green legitimation. Before venturing into this alternative vision there is, however, reason to elaborate a bit on the Aristotelian paradigm. The manifestations of this paradigm are far from limited to the texts we engage with here. On the contrary, Aristotelianism is prolific in contemporary rhetorical studies and the paradigm seems to be the dominant perspective in interdisciplinary research, where the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric is regularly imported. Interestingly, this dominance seems unaffected by the paradigm's limitations—which do exist, especially as concern rhetorical ethics. In the following sections, we want to problematize parts of the Aristotelian paradigm, in order to provide openings for a more constructive approach.

4.2 THE ARISTOTELIAN PARADIGM—DOMINANT ALBEIT DEFICIENT

Before returning to its problems, let us say something about the relevance and conceptual merits of the Aristotelian paradigm by further developing on how it has affected contemporary research. Here, Wæraas and Ihlen (2009) provide a way in, as they very clearly build on the conceptual architecture of classical Greek rhetoric. In analyzing legitimation as a symbolic, and primarily verbal (that is: word-using), activity, they note the importance of ethos in explicit persuasion processes. In line with the Aristotelian tradition, they see ethos as essentially discursively constructed, and they note the three traditional strategies for constructing the speaker's character as trustworthy, that is, by demonstrating:

- (α) virtue (*aretē*);
- (β) practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), and
- (γ) goodwill toward the audience (*eunoia*).

This trifold division is central to Aristotle's teaching on ethos (Aristotle, Rhetoric 1378a and passim), emphasizing the importance of showing (α) your good moral character, (β) your good sense, sagacity, and expertise

and to overall try to come across as intelligent and knowledgeable (about the subject at hand). Further, you should (γ) demonstrate your goodwill toward the audience, that is, *eunoia*. In the Aristotelian tradition *eunoia* is tied to his conception of friendship (*philia*), entailing that the speaker should signify three things: ($\gamma 1$) connectedness and similarity with the audience (identification), ($\gamma 2$) commonality of value, affirming their basic aspirations and beliefs, and ($\gamma 3$) having the same friends and enemies, affirming their prejudices.

Wæraas and Ihlen (2009) adopt this trifold division ($\alpha - \gamma$) and let the Aristotelian scheme guide their research, performing a qualitative study of documents reporting on the sustainability efforts of three major American companies. In doing so, they find that most claims in the reports were attributable to three general themes, corresponding to *aretē*, *phronēsis*, and *eunoia*. They label their themes:

- (i) “We clean up our own act” (*aretē*),
- (ii) “We improve the world” (*phronēsis*), and
- (iii) “We are like you” (*eunoia*).

Interestingly, however, their analysis also revealed a fourth theme, concerning endorsements and approvals from third parties, which the authors label: (iv) “Others approve of us.” This fourth theme is obviously an important one and useful for constructing an environmental ethos. The rhetorical technique is also widely used (cf. e.g. Futerra 2008; TerraChoice 2009). It is however harder to fit into the traditional Aristotelian scheme (especially if the pigeonholes furnished by *aretē*, *phronēsis*, and *eunoia* are already occupied). The lack of fit is largely due to Aristotle not presenting rhetoric as a dynamic social performance. Instead, his analysis implies a conception of rhetoric as a set of atemporal rules and guidelines, frozen in time (cf. Haskins 2004; Bengtson 2019).

The closest concept to the “others approve of us” theme, in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, seems to be the brief mention of witnesses, provided the third party is considered a witness, and its approval as evidence of a company’s green legitimacy. However, Aristotle views witnesses as a non-artistic mode of persuasion, which, in his technical jargon, means that he equals witnesses to laws, oaths, contracts, and torture—all topics he locates *outside* the art of rhetoric. In our view, this would surely be an unsatisfying positioning of the analytical theme “others approve of us”, as it obviously performs functions which rhetoric should be able to account for,

considering that it can, and is widely used to, support arguments concerning certain organizational ethoi (among other things). Invoking the ethoi of others can certainly be used to support *aretē*, which allows for relating this technique to the Aristotelian paradigm. Still, such an understanding is reductive, as it fails to accommodate essential aspects of the “others approve of us”-theme, and, in any case, the technique differs from the more typical cases of illustrating one’s virtuosity (Wæraas and Ihlen 2009) in such a way that the Aristotelian understanding is just not very helpful.¹

The studies by Wæraas and Ihlen and Frandsen and Johansen have made important contributions to the discussions on green marketing. They have shown how the conceptual apparatus of classical rhetoric can be applied to the problem of organizational legitimation, and how the relationship between the organization and its surrounding environment can be conceptualized as a verbal activity, as well as illustrated some of the promising possibilities of the institutional approach. However, the authors themselves acknowledge the need for further theoretical, methodological, and empirical development, and thus call for further research. The legitimacy of such calls is indicated already in the fact that the Aristotelian scheme cannot incorporate an important and prevalent technique of ethos construction: the lending of someone else’s ethos by putting words in their mouth. The Aristotelian paradigm thus has its limits, one being the non-comprehensiveness of the analytical scheme for examining ethos.

¹It might here also be noted that the “others approve of us” theme is reminiscent of the rhetorical device of *prosōpopoia* (noted by e.g. Demetrius, *On style*, who was possibly a contemporary of Aristotle), where a speaker communicates with the audience by speaking as another person, group or object—essentially putting words in the mouth of someone absent (cf. e.g. Fahnestock 2011). Still, the persuasiveness of the device does not lie merely in the wording of the speaker, as the argumentation is necessarily parasitic on the ethos of the absentee—begging the question whether the discursive ethos can be understood without consideration of prior ethos. In fact, the whole point of “channeling” the absentee is to mobilize the potentially persuasive power of *their* judgment. This dynamic is especially interesting, as, in cases of green marketing, the identity of the absentee made to speak on behalf of the speaker is not always a well-known authority. Instead, it is often a quite vague entity, merely filling the role of an external expert or arbiter. In general, the absentee and its endorsement are, of course, made out to sound persuasive, but the actual identity of the endorser is often unclear—a covertness sometimes explained by the fact that an apparent third-party endorsement is in fact an endorsement by an affiliate of the speaker, or even part of the speakers organization (cf., on car producer’s tactic of “self-awarding”, Frandsen and Johansen 2011).

In our view, however, there are more significant shortcomings. Perhaps the most important one stems from Aristotle's view of rhetoric as an amoral art—normatively empty, practically nihilist. Admittedly, the Aristotelian separation of ethics and rhetoric seems less definitive when considering that, in practice, the same teacher taught both arts, to the same students. Nevertheless, his decoupling has had a massive historical influence and is still dominant today. The ideology is often conveyed by phrases akin to “Rhetoric, in itself, is neither good nor evil, for it is merely a tool”—a trope often used to refute accusations against the subject of rhetoric, based on the perceived immorality of a speaker using “rhetorical” means of persuasion. Thus, the Aristotelian paradigm entails that the subject of rhetoric has nothing to say about morality, normative values, or the Good. Rhetoric can utilize existent values, but these values are external to rhetoric, and rhetoricians, qua rhetoricians, have nothing to contribute when it comes to the normativity of the legitimation process—other than the advice to strategically use whatever is already out there, in the cultural value systems of the *polis*.

Such a conception of rhetoric is not without problems, especially as regards the political genre (*genos politicon*, *genus deliberativum*), and, despite its dominance today, parts of the Aristotelian paradigm were a matter of controversy already in classical Athens and Rome. Hence, there are other classical authors who have more to contribute to the discussions on construction and performance of ethos, as well as to the post performance analysis of an actor's ethos. Recalling these classical teachings can be fruitful today. They can help us distinguish, and perhaps even reconsider, some of the notions about rhetoric, and thus green marketing, that are now generally taken for granted.

4.3 APPEARANCES, DOXA, AND THE AMORALITY OF RHETORIC

We need to dwell a bit on the structure, and possible limitations, of the Aristotelian paradigm, as this provides necessary background for our later discussions. Thus, it should first be noted that Aristotle's conception of rhetoric as an amoral tool is inextricably tied to the concept of *doxa*, which is a key concept in many conceptualizations of rhetoric, and to fundamental questions of rhetorical ontology. Simply put, rhetorical ontology concerns the role of rhetoric for a human understanding of *being*. We will

circle back to this, but first we need to expand on the concept of *doxa*, which is commonly understood as popular opinion. Thus, when rhetoric is situated in relation to *doxa*, it is framed as an art that deals with the utilization and manipulation of opinions in the public domain (Bengtson 2019; on implications for law, cf. Mossberg 2020). Interestingly, however, in classical Greek, the term *doxa* has more meanings than “opinion”. Taking account of this polysemy can be a way of highlighting the difference between, on the one hand, a traditional modern understanding of communication as an exchange of statements transmitting information, and, on the other hand, the classical experience where language use was understood as intrinsically linked to questions of reputation and appearances. For instance, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1953, 2000), who was well versed in classical Greek, has described the multiple meanings of *doxa* thusly:

Mit dem Namen δόξα wird Vielfältiges genannt: 1. Ansehen als Ruhm, 2. Ansehen als schlichte Ansicht, die etwas bietet, 3. Ansehen als: nur so aussehen: der ‘Schein’ als bloßer Anschein. 4. Ansicht, die ein Mensch sich bildet, Meinung.

[The term δόξα [*doxa*] names various things 1) aspect, or respect, as glory; 2) aspect as the sheer view, that something offers; 3) aspect as: merely looking so, “seeming” as mere semblance; 4) a view, that a person constructs for himself, opinion.]

The implication is that rhetoric—as an art dealing with *doxa*—is intimately linked to questions of how we reveal ourselves to others through symbols, as well as to how we view others, and the related problem of authenticity.

Plato’s (in)famous deriding of rhetoric could be read in light of this ontological positioning of rhetoric. His criticism emphasizes rhetoric’s relation to public opinion, which in his understanding is equivalent to false knowledge and mere semblance. Aristotle, on the other hand, is often attributed with restoring rhetoric’s status as an art, legitimizing a systematic treatment of *doxa*. However, Aristotle’s restoration comes at a cost, as the rhetoric he proposes is cut loose and delimited from questions of ethics—it becomes mere technique. This separation is perhaps never clearer than in Aristotle’s discussions of *ethos*, where he declares that, from the perspective of rhetoric, the speaker’s *ethos* is to be found in the speech and nowhere else. He thereby puts aside questions of the speaker’s moral standing or reputation beyond the speech and focuses merely on the image

that is presented through it. This is indeed an odd move in Greek society, where reputation and honor were of utmost importance. Systematically, however, it is a clever move, as it allows Aristotle to put rhetoric into a neat little box, as an art concerned only with persuasive performance, effectively neutralizing some of Plato's criticisms.

If we want to interpret Aristotle as sympathetically as possible in relation to our present project, and differently than sketched in the preceding section, we could argue that limiting the analysis to only the discursive ethos (viewing ethos as entirely constructed through the performance) aligns with the rhetorical ontology implied in the very concept of *doxa*. As Heidegger hints at, *being* is no more than what is presented and apprehended. In other words, to be glorious or honorable, in the public domain of classical Athens, *is* to be presented and apprehended as such. Consequently, if one is presented and apprehended as such, this is in effect how one *is*—as, from the perspective of rhetorical ontology, *being* is always socially and thereby rhetorically constructed.

For our discussions of green marketing, such an alternative reading of Aristotle provides us with a proto-variant of the legitimation dynamic between organization and its environment, which, in this context, can be understood as the surrounding society. The Aristotelian variant would however still be strangely limited to the present moment of the speech act, as it excludes the aspect of “prior ethos”—implying a reductionist view of the rhetorical situation. Therefore, it fails to address whether green legitimation has any real ethical consequences. These limitations correspond to aspects that we, in our previous discussion of ethos in organizational theory, presented as in need of further development. Thereby, they provide additional support for the need to go beyond an Aristotelian understanding.

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Revisiting the Rhetorical Tradition and Acquainting Ourselves with the Virtuous Orator

Abstract This chapter starts taking inventory of the building blocks for a virtue perspective, by drawing on the classical tradition. The view of rhetoric as an integral part of public life is introduced and the rhetorical teachings of Isocrates, Quintilian, and Cicero are discussed, with particular focus on the virtue ethics they develop and how they can aid constructive analysis of present-day issues.

Keywords Isocratean pedagogy • Roman oratory • Rhetorical virtues • The common good • Rhetoric and ethics

5.1 ISOCRATES: RHETORICAL ACTION FOR THE CIVIC GOOD

So far we have argued for the need for a constructive turn in the scholarly discussion of green marketing, described some such attempts from the field of organizational rhetoric, and discussed the Aristotelian paradigm that these attempts conform to. We will now provide a somewhat different history of rhetoric and its relation to virtue. This presentation works both to further illustrate the historical paradigms at play in these discussions and to outline a possible new constructive paradigm relevant for us today. In doing so, we focus on the contributions by the classical rhetoricians

Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian. Their ways of combining questions related to ethos, virtue, and rhetoric present us with an alternative to the Platonic view that public rhetoric should be viewed with suspicion, as well as to the Aristotelian view that the art of rhetoric should be understood as a neutral, amoral tool, separate from ethics. We argue that Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian provide us with better building blocks for combining institutional theory and rhetorical perspectives.

For both chronological and substantial reasons, we first turn to the influential Athenian Isocrates. He set up his own school around 390 BC, barely preceding Plato (cf. e.g. Mikkola 1954; Eucken 1983). As a teacher of oratory, Isocrates puts the ethical character of the speaker dead center. While Plato looked upon public life with skepticism, Isocrates celebrated the value of civic life and its duties. He saw public life as a life of virtue and portrayed his own teachings as providing students the ability to reason well in the *polis* and to contribute to the collective good. In relation to the concept of virtue, Isocrates emphasizes virtues such as justice (*dikaïosynē*) and moderation (*sōphrosynē*) but also piety (*hosios*), courage (*andreía*), and wisdom (*sofia*) (cf. Chase 2009).

What is most interesting, however, in Isocrates' view on the ethics of the *rhetor* is not specific virtues. Instead, it is his consistency in relating the virtues of the speaker to the question of the common good. For Isocrates the common good was tied to the cause of *pan-Hellenism*, that is, the idea of a greater Greek nation, united by the commonality of its people and the Hellenistic culture, distinguishing them from the barbarians. To grasp the significance of his highly situated understanding of the common good, it needs to be contrasted with the competing notions at the time, when the art of public speaking was understood as a technique for personal gain. In fact, professional teachers of rhetoric are commonly said to have first emerged to help households protect their interests in disputes over the ownership of land (Cicero, *Brutus* 46; cf. e.g. Cole 1991). Isocrates places rhetoric in a much larger context. In many ways, his views on pan-Hellenism and Athenian society can be described as a value conservative position. In fact, the origin of the idea of pan-Hellenism is conventionally attributed to the Greek's resistance to the Persian invasions of 490 and 480–479 BC, implying the goal of conserving Hellenistic culture. However, the specifics of his value system do not diminish the conceptual significance of his way of positioning rhetorical civic work as contributing to the common good.

This aspect of Isocratean rhetoric has been explored by communications scholar Kenneth R. Chase (2009), who argues that, for Isocrates, the key virtue is piety. The Greek word is *hosios* (ἁγιος) which has strong religious connotations. In Chase's reading, Isocrates understands piety as an attitudinal commitment toward acting in accordance with the moral implications of something greater than oneself (such as, but not necessarily limited to, the divine).

Following a similar line of thought, rhetoric scholar Robert Hariman (2004) argues that Isocrates' perspective is far from obsolete. In fact, he claims that, in the present-day environmental discourse, we can find an equivalent to the Isocratean notion of pan-Hellenism:

Let's describe panhellenism as an attempt to identify a new class of political problems, and to create political harmony by expanding the horizon of politics, and to ensure cultural sustainability amidst large-scale forces of change. What, then, would be the best articulation of this program today?

In a word: ecology. An Isocratean politics would be one that would argue for a global political concord to address those problems that the individual states are incapable of solving on their own. The problems include ozone depletion, resource exhaustion, the distribution of wealth and scarcity, population growth and movement, and bio-extinction.

Hariman also sketches a model of the Isocratean pedagogy that could instill both mastery of persuasion and growth in virtue. The first step of the pedagogy is to focus on questions related to "the common good", which are the only ones that can instill honorable character. The second step is for the aspiring orator to look around for the best available examples of actions, and then contemplate and appraise those examples. Such a pedagogy could of course be incorporated in an educational system, such as Isocrates' school, or contemporary higher education. However, the most interesting aspect of Isocrates' pedagogy is that it is not limited to the classroom. On the contrary, only the plethora of voices of the city can provide the illustration and inspiration requisite for forming a truly virtuous character. Interestingly, this pedagogical perspective does not rest on a denunciation of self-interest, as often is the case in Plato's writings. Instead, the defining characteristic of the ideal virtuous orator is that he pursues his self-interests in a way that aligns with the common good.

What cues can we take from Isocrates? Let us answer that question with another question—an explorative one: Would it be possible to shift focus

in marketing education, as well as in the public discourse on marketing, toward questions of public good, and in addition put more focus on contemplating and appraising the very best of examples, rather than on shaming the bad ones? In other words, what would happen if we viewed marketing neither as suspicious manipulation, nor as a neutral, amoral tool, but instead considered how self-interest through marketing could be channeled toward the common good?

In Isocrates' understanding of pan-Hellenism as a common good, we can see a clear link to how institutional theory discusses social norms and values. The Isocratean model however seems to go further than the Scandinavian form of institutional theory. His model portrays the organization not only as a translator of institutionally sanctioned norms (including institutionalized rules as well as less formalized cultural-cognitive ideas). The organization is something more, as it can act as a performative implementer and proponent of these very norms. And, acting thusly, it can function as an example, encouraging others to imitate it—effectively aiding the societal impact of the adopted virtues. The organization thus becomes a rhetorical co-creator of the norms of the value system.

5.2 CICERO ON HARMONIOUS PROPRIETY, AND QUINTILIAN ON CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Three centuries later, the Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero presented *eloquentia* (eloquence) and *sapientia* (wisdom) in combination as the cornerstone of his own theory of rhetoric. He thereby combined rhetoric with ethics, politics, and philosophy. Beyond that, Cicero highlighted *decorum*, or the ability to adhere to *decorum*, as the most essential virtue of rhetoric (Kapust 2011, with further references). This virtue encapsulates the capacity to meet the expectations and standards of the audience. For Cicero, *decorum* was both a moral virtue and a rhetorical virtue (e.g. On duties [De officiis] I.95; Orator 70 et seq). It spans from judgments regarding adherence to the overarching value systems of the audience and their views on society to questions of the appropriate style and even the correct postures. In the Ciceronian understanding, *decorum* is thus central to *inventio* and *actio*, but it effectively spans all the parts of rhetoric. In this emphasis on *decorum*, we can once again see a connection to the formative power of the social environment, which is an object of study also for institutional theory.

For present purposes, the most interesting aspect of Cicero's discussion is his emphasis on the importance of *decorum* in relation to the character of the speaker. According to him, there should be harmony and propriety between the speech and the character of the speaker, as well as between the speech and the character of the audience. In this light, another Ciceronian virtue, the related *prudentia*, takes on a specific meaning. Prudence does not simply lie in a search for truth. Rather, it lies in the practical capacity to adhere to the values and views of the audience, while at the same time being authentic in relation to one's own character and individual nature. The understanding of *decorum* and prudence, as consistency with one's own character, also has a temporal dimension: Being consistent (*constantia*) is a matter of being true to oneself over time. In Cicero's words (On duties I.111–12):

it can be nothing more than the uniform consistency in the course of our lives as a whole and all its individual actions. And this uniform consistency one could not maintain by copying the personal traits of others and eliminating one's own.

Relating back to the present day and the problem of green promises, this temporal *constantia* is a point that seems relevant to, for example, sustainability reporting. It would imply the need to be consistent with one's earlier reports and statements of goals. It would thus not be very virtuous to keep "forgetting" one's previous statements, when making new reports—reports where one can instead just formulate new goals to be later forgotten, etc. In summary, Cicero, in his view of the ideal orator, not only incorporates the virtues of adapting to the audience but also of staying true to oneself. Additionally, he argues that this rhetorical virtue of consistency cannot be reached without authenticity. Hence, it cannot be mere semblance, in the Platonic sense.

While Cicero provides arguments for the necessity of moral consistency between the speaker and his discourse, a century later, the Roman educator Marcus Fabius Quintilian takes this line of thought one step further, namely, by arguing that rhetoric could replace moral philosophy—and that rhetoric, in itself, constitutes a virtue (Walzer 2006). He is critical toward the (Aristotelian) separation between rhetoric and philosophy. In his eyes, such a division meant that the important—and, to Quintilian, inherently rhetorical—questions of ethics and moral virtue were in effect detached from the art of rhetoric, even though rhetoric ought to be the

primary pedagogical vehicle for these subjects. In line with his convictions, Quintilian’s teachings incorporate ideas about, and strategies for, character formation, aiming to promote aspiring orators to internalize good ethical principles.

Simply put, he claims that we can teach ethics as part of a rhetorical training program—and that we, in fact, can teach it through rhetoric. In Quintilian’s portrayal, the ideal orator—that is, “the good man, trained in the art of oratory”, known to the latinites as *vir bonus dicendi peritus*—knows both what is expedient and what is honorable. The orator knows how to utilize societal values expediently but is also guided and regulated by virtue in that very process.

The historian of rhetoric Arthur Walzer (2006) argues that Quintilian’s work provides a hierarchy of values. What is honorable, from a societal perspective, takes moral precedence over what is situationally expedient. The primary principle is, however, to not risk one’s own honor. In thus giving hierarchical priority to the speaker’s honor, Quintilian echoes the Ciceronian theme about the fundamental value of consistency, while simultaneously providing an ethical model where both the practice of rhetoric and the pursuit for legitimacy can be acknowledged as virtuous—as good.

5.3 LESSONS FROM CLASSICAL RHETORIC

What conclusions can we draw from Quintilian’s perspective, today? Of course, we cannot state as fact that there is an inherently moral “good core” in the art of rhetoric and that we can teach ethics through rhetoric, just because Quintilian said so. Nevertheless, recalling his position is valuable, as it de-naturalizes the dominant view of today. It can help subvert the cognitive legitimacy of the position that rhetoric—or marketing—is in itself neutral or amoral, and therefore ought to be taught separate from ethics. In other words, by re-conceptualizing marketing or corporate communications through Quintilian, we can undermine the position that it should be taught as mere technique, free of value.

Our approach in this book, aiming for a list of virtues for green marketing, could—in light of this—be understood as an experiment, investigating what would happen if we revived the Quintilian paradigm of rhetoric (building on the Isocratean and Ciceronian ones), rather than just

continued reproducing the Aristotelian paradigm. In other words: What would happen if we—in lieu of an ethically neutral rhetoric (Aristotle), or a morally degenerate rhetoric (Plato)—dare to explore the idea of a morally constructive rhetoric, where symbolic action matters, as a matter of ethics? What possibilities would that entail?

Following this route, we could take more cues from Quintilian and his program for rhetorical education than the mere position that rhetoric could be seen as a discipline for teaching virtue. The rhetorical critic Robert E. Terrill (2016) has explicated how Quintilian's educative program provides a model for how to use the teaching of rhetoric (or communication, or writing, or marketing—or even law, we hazard to add) as an education in virtue. Interestingly, in Terrill's reading, Quintilian's program is focused on imitation—a technique which, as already mentioned, contemporary scholars have identified as a basic strategy for gaining legitimacy.

Terrill's argument is that the practice of rhetoric, according to Quintilian, is the manifest performance of ethical judgment. Terrill argues that imitative pedagogy, including textual replication and ethical emulation, provides a way both to form character and to reflect on that very formation. Importantly, the ethical perspective of Quintilian (and that of Cicero and Isocrates) is not based on eternal rules or strict moral codes. Instead, it is based on an adherence to the situational characteristics, including one's own character and the values of the audience. Generally speaking, we could, from Quintilian, derive an understanding of rhetoric—and, by extension, of contemporary marketing—as a social arena where virtues are reproduced, by implicit manifestation. To put it simply, when an organization for instance tells the truth, this is a manifestation that implies the virtuosity of truth telling.

Admittedly, this positive description probably differs from the common understanding of green marketing today, as this seems to be more skeptical, or even cynical. However, one of the goals of this book is to discuss if, and how, a more ethically constructive dynamic can be facilitated within our contemporary market economy. To us, it seems that reading contemporary discourse on green legitimization through an Isocratean lens and adding a Ciceronian and Quintilian perspective to the discussions on the construction of green *ethoi* can open new avenues for exploration. Such a mode of inquiry can thus suggest novel ideas worth trying out.

Building on Wæraas and Ihlen's (2009) conceptualization of legitimation as a verbal activity, we have here attempted to illustrate how the rhetorical tradition can offer more than a mere typology to better understand the argumentative forms of such verbal acts. The rhetorical tradition also provides a model for a normatively constructive dynamic. Public rhetoric can be understood and discussed as the formative performance of ethical judgment: a performance that is not locked to a temporal present, but part of an ongoing social dynamic, continually (re)negotiating the common good. Thus, public rhetoric, ideally including green marketing, can be more than mere semblance, or a manipulative tool to reach strategic goals of self-interest.

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From the Sins of Greenwashing to the Virtues of Green Marketing

Abstract This chapter further develops the virtue perspective. First, by taking stock of the classical virtues. Then, we flip the “sins of greenwashing” to bring to light the corresponding virtues they imply. Thereby, we provide a detailed model for the analysis of rhetorical virtues, specifically tailored for judging the ethical qualities of green marketing. Green marketing is viewed as a specific form of environmental communication, subject to rhetoric’s domain.

Keywords Sins and signs of greenwashing • Rhetorical virtues • Green marketing virtues

6.1 TAKING STOCK: THE TRADITIONAL VIRTUES

In exploring the notion of an ethically constructive rhetoric as an art contributing to the common good, the classical rhetoricians have emphasized the value of carefully examining good examples, that is, *paradeigmata* in the sense of positive exemplars. The classical teachings include a pedagogy of creative imitation and critical emulation.

For such an art, or rhetorical enterprise, it is not sufficient simply to map out the *topoi* for persuasion (i.e. the metaphorical places, where arguments can be found). We also need a typology, or better yet, a more fully

developed framework for reflecting on the relative ethical virtues of the examples we choose to scrutinize. Therefore, we will now, as promised, engage with the scholarship on the “sins of greenwashing”, which has become a standard analytic in the greenwashing discussions (e.g. Delmas and Burbano 2011; Baum 2012; Aggarwal and Kadyan 2014; Scanlan 2017). We look at the sins and try to articulate their corresponding virtues.

In doing so, we will co-read Futtera’s (2008) “Ten signs of greenwashing” and TerraChoice’s “Seven sins of greenwashing” (TerraChoice 2009) to find the correlations and then identify their corresponding virtues, core vices, and problem types. Further, we will discuss some additional sins, of a somewhat different nature, that have been proposed by environmental sociologist Stephen J. Scanlan (2017) in an expansion of the list of greenwashing sins.

Our general approach is based on an understanding of public rhetoric as an arena for the reproduction of virtues, and a space where character is formed. Character and virtue are not seen as external to rhetoric and appearances, but as integral elements thereof. Hence, the typology formation of the current section is focused on textual manifestations of virtue. This focus is consistent with a rhetorical ontology along the lines sketched in the preceding sections, entailing that there is no way of definitely separating character virtues from their concrete manifestations. Hence, we acknowledge that an institutional norm system for green marketing virtues must simultaneously concern, on the one hand, norms of character and, on the other hand, norms regarding the use of symbols, that is, norms for the public performance of ethical judgment.

Let us sum up the specific virtues that have already been mentioned. We have:

- I. Aristotle’s three dimensions of ethos: virtue (*aretē*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and goodwill toward the audience (*eunoia*).
- II. Isocrates’ emphasis on justice (*diakaiosynē*) and moderation (*sōphrosynē*) but also courage, wisdom, and piety.
- III. Cicero’s propriety (*decorum*) and prudence (*prudentia*).
- IV. Intertwined with these last two virtues is consistency (*constantia*), which is of key importance for both Quintilian and Cicero.

Thus far, we have focused on character virtues and some general virtues of rhetoricity, such as decorum. However, there are also general virtues

embodied in the discussion of *style* within the rhetorical tradition, which you might note below. As regards the explicit stylistic virtues, different authors enumerate them somewhat differently (cf. e.g. Fahnestock 2011), but a possible synthesis of the main virtues of style is as follows:

- A. Correctness, or purity (*latinitas/sermo purus*), meaning adherence to prevailing conventions of vocabulary and syntax, grammar, and usage. Note that deviations from customary usage can indicate either a grammatical vice or a rhetorical virtue (use of a rhetorical device).
- B. Clarity (*perspicuitas*) is related to correctness and involves using proper names and terms, being as precise and specific as necessary, and following a straightforward arrangement of words and sentences. In a sense, it is the opposite of vagueness and ambiguity (*ambiguitas, amphibologia*) as well as obscurity (*obscuritas*).
- C. “Evidence” (*evidentia*) does not mean proof in a logical or forensic sense. Instead, it is about making arguments vivid, giving them emotional appeal (*pathos*), and conjuring images in the minds of the audience. The meaning relates to “that which is evident” or “which comes before the eyes”. The Greek term for this stylistic virtue is *enargeia*, implying the energetic effect of the virtuous orator’s words.
- D. Propriety, as its Latin label *decorum* (which is both a virtue of argumentation and of style) implies, is the aptness of the expressive means used, describing how well they fit relative to the subject matter and situation.
- E. Ornateness (*ornatus*) concerns the aesthetic qualities of style, including the figures of speech. Simply put, the style that aims at producing delight or admiration in the audience. Ornateness is thereby also connected to the rhetorical canon of delivery (*actio*) through its concern with rhythm, and attentiveness to the sounds of language.

Having thus taken stock of the traditional virtues of the orator and of style, we now move on to further elaborating on the possibilities of developing the analytical framework of green marketing virtues.

6.2 DEVELOPING THE SCHEME: FLIPPING THE SINS

In our view, the traditional virtues of the orator, and the stylistic virtues, can no doubt be utilized in analysis of modern communication quite generally, thus including green communication. However, precisely due to their generality of analytical scope, it follows that they are not specifically tailored to analysis of green promises, or even green communication more broadly. Conversely, there have been several suggestions of analytical schemes in the contemporary discussions on greenwashing, which are specifically tailored for the analysis of green communication, and primarily green marketing. Two of the most influential suggestions are found in the “Ten signs of greenwashing” (Futerra 2008) and the “Seven sins of greenwashing” (TerraChoice 2009). Both the Signs and the Sins are analytical schemes, built on identifying what kinds of greenwashing actually occur in practice, breaking these down, and sorting them into categories. These categorizations are thus specifically tailored for the analysis of green communication. Both the Sins and Signs enumerated can, however, be viewed as particular instances of more general problems of human communication, and the problems they enumerate can thus be generalized, in effect articulating a more general communicative vice, each of which will imply its own corresponding opposite virtue. Thus, to reiterate our previous example, a “fib” regarding the “greenness” of a product can be seen as a particular instance of the more general communicative vice of fibbing, or indeed lying, which in turn entails the virtue of telling the truth.

In the following table, we take inventory of the Signs, as well as the Sins. As the table illustrates, there is a great deal of correspondence between the two—a correspondence no doubt attributable to the fact that, as a matter of historical causality, the Sins are a further development on the Signs. The parallels are demonstrated by our placing of the original Sign (in the first column, i.e. the one on the far left) next to the corresponding Sin (in the second column). These are then contrasted with the implied virtue (the middle column), followed by a generalization of the communicative problem (dubbed the Core vice), and finally a categorization of the Problem type (in the right-most column). The table is followed by a discussion.

<i>Ten signs of greenwashing (Futerra 2008)</i>	<i>Seven sins of greenwashing (TerraChoice)</i>	<i>Virtue(s)</i>	<i>Core vice(s)</i>	<i>Ethical problem types</i>
Fluffy language ("Words or terms with no clear meaning, e.g. 'eco-friendly'")	Vagueness ("Using terms that are too broad or poorly defined to be properly understood (an 'all-natural' cleaner may still contain harmful ingredients that are naturally occurring)")	Preciseness (adequately defined) Specificity (adequately narrow)	Ambiguity Vagueness	Language use
Gobbledygook ("Jargon or information that only a scientist could understand")		Transparency	Obscurity	Language use
Green products v. dirty company ("Such as efficient light bulbs made in a factory which pollutes rivers")	Hidden trade-off ("Labeling a product as environmentally friendly based on a small set of attributes (i.e., made of recycled content) when other attributes not addressed (i.e., energy use of manufacturing, gas emissions, etc.) might make a bigger impact on the eco-friendliness of a product as a whole")	Balanced disclosure of relevant aspects (e.g. as relating to product/company/process)	Omission or suppression of relevant aspects (cherry picking)	Selection (deflection)
Lack of credibility/ just not credible ("Eco friendly" cigarettes anyone?; 'Greening' a dangerous product doesn't make it safe")		Balanced disclosure of economic, environmental, social, and ethical responsibility	Suppression of relevant economic, social, or ethical aspects (disingenuous appropriation of green rhetoric)	Selection (deflection)
Suggestive pictures ("Green images that indicate a (unjustified) green impact, e.g. flowers blooming from exhaust pipes")		Appropriate evocation of/appeal to emotion and images	Inappropriate evocation of/appeal to emotions and suggestive images	Pathos
Irrelevant claims ("Emphasizing one tiny green attribute when everything else is un-green")	Irrelevance ("Stating something that is technically true but not a distinguishing factor when looking for eco-friendly products (i.e., advertised as 'FC-Free'—but since CFCs are banned by law this is unremarkable)")	Relevance (of claims to propositions)	Irrelevance	Inference
Best in class? ("Declaring you are slightly greener than the rest, even if the rest are pretty terrible")	Lesser of two evils ("Claiming to be greener than other products in its category when the category as a whole may be environmentally unfriendly (i.e., an organic cigarette may be greener, but, you know, it's still a cigarette)")	Fair and relevant comparison (as to objects, modes of comparison and presentation)	Misleading comparisons	Inference

(continued)

(continued)

<i>Ten signs of greenwashing (Futerra 2008)</i>	<i>Seven sins of greenwashing (TerraChoice)</i>	<i>Virtue(s)</i>	<i>Core vice(s)</i>	<i>Ethical problem types</i>
Imaginary friends and endorsements (“A ‘label’ that looks like third party endorsement ... except it’s made up”)	Worshipping false labels (“Implying that a product has a third-party endorsement or certification that doesn’t actually exist, often through the use of fake certification labels”)	Use of authentic and reliable external authorities	Misleading use or construction of external authorities	Evidence
No proof (“It could be right, but where’s the evidence?”)	No proof (“Making an environmental claim without providing easily accessible evidence on either the label or the product website (i.e., a light bulb is touted as energy efficient with no supporting data)”)	Use of supportive evidence	Lack of supportive evidence	Evidence
Outright lying (“Totally fabricated claims or data”)	Fibbing/lying (“Advertising something that just isn’t true (i.e., claims to be Energy Star Certified, but isn’t)”)	Truthfulness	Untruthfulness	Reality use

Focusing on the virtues, as appropriate responses to general problems of human communication, the systematization above could be summarized in the following list:

Ethics of language use

1. Preciseness (adequately defined)
2. Specificity (adequately narrow)
3. Transparency

Ethics of selection and deflection

4. Balanced disclosure of relevant aspects (e.g. as relating to product/company/process)
5. Balanced disclosure of economic, environmental, social, and ethical responsibility

Ethics of pathos argumentation

6. Appropriate evocation of/appeal to emotion, for example, by use of suggestive images

Ethics of inference making

7. Relevance (of claims to propositions)
8. Fair and relevant comparison (as to objects, modes of comparison and presentation)

Ethics of evidence use

9. Use of authentic and reliable external authorities
10. Use of supportive evidence

(Ethics of reality use)

11. (Truthfulness)

Now, as regards to several of these ethical problems, it could of course be said that the very function of marketing, qua marketing, is to portray products and/or their sources in a positive light. And every student of rhetoric knows that all symbol use—by necessity—involves highlighting certain aspects, while simultaneously downplaying others. These basic premises should not be ignored. Nor can they be expunged, or fundamentally transformed. However, when we acknowledge these consequences of a rhetorical ontology, we should also simultaneously acknowledge that rhetorical practice can be seen as the manifest performance of ethical judgment and that green marketing can be construed as an arena for such ethical performance. This entails that the question of which aspects to highlight, or downplay, involves ethical dilemmas. The problems thus have clear ethical dimensions that cannot be separated from the praxis and study of rhetoric.

With this book, we want to propose the first ten virtues, presented above, as a framework for:

- A. examining green marketing in specific cases,
- B. supporting marketers in their work with developing ethical (principles for) green marketing, and finally
- C. exploring how adjusting regulatory frameworks can contribute to sustainability and legal certainty, thereby strengthening consumer rights (consumers here in the sense of recipients of marketing), in relation to the rhetoric of green promises.

Note that we have put the eleventh virtue of truthfulness in parenthesis. This virtue could well be left out of the list of primary virtues of green marketing, as, in a sense, it is located outside the problematic “gray area” of ethical rhetoric. Suspending the philosophically pressing, yet nonetheless perennial (chronic), issues of the *concept* of truth, truthfulness is not so much a problem of discourse, or of the rhetorical characteristics of discourse, as it is a problem of reality. It effectively pertains to some kind of correspondence between (rhetorical) discourse and an (extra rhetorical) reality, which provides the measuring stick required to ascertain the truthfulness of a statement. Further, to put it bluntly, “not lying” should perhaps not be seen so much as a rhetorically virtuous act, as a prerequisite for at all legitimately being (i.e. acting) in the public sphere. As a matter of law, the consequences of lying—for commercial actors—can in some, or perhaps even many, cases be harsh, depending of course on the circumstances. It should probably also be noted that our placement of “truthfulness” outside of the core virtues of green marketing is significant. It signifies an approach differing from much of the current discussions of greenwashing, which tend to either center on the question of whether the claims are true (or greenwashing) or simply presuppose the invalidity of green claims (implying their greenwashing characteristics).

6.3 GREEN MARKETING AS CLIMATE COMMUNICATION

Regarding the greenwashing discussions, an interesting contribution, which further builds on the Signs and Sins, and stays within the discursive “gray area”, has been developed by the American environmental sociologist Stephen J. Scanlan. In a critical article, he scrutinizes the “green” rhetoric of petroleum companies utilizing methods of hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking” for short: a set of well stimulations techniques designed to maximize the yield of oil and gas wells. Fracking is controversial due to its effects on the surrounding environment, and there has emerged an international anti-fracking movement. This development has in turn spawned countermovements from within, or supported by, the petroleum industry. Scanlan concerns himself with these countermovements, of which he is severely critical. His criticism has been read as a proposal to add additional greenwashing sins, extending TerraChoice’s list with six more (Scanlan 2017; cf. de Freitas Netto et al. 2020). Namely, the sins of:

12. reinforcing *false hopes* (e.g. that “fracking”, even though it has an enormous negative impact on the environment, is the only way forward as part of an ecological modernization paradigm where technological development and green capitalism will solve environmental and climate issues),
13. *fearmongering* (through claims that reorients public understanding of risk e.g. by shifting the location of the hazardous consequences, or by fabricating insecurity related to not accepting a certain practice),
14. *broken promises* (relating to positive qualities that compensate for negative impact of business activities, thereby obscuring who loses or exploiting the hopes and trust of the citizenry),
15. *environmental injustice* (focusing on a segment of the population that benefits from a business practice without suffering its consequences—“a classic pattern of injustice in the long history of resource extraction”),
16. *downplaying hazardous consequences* (hiding the reality of inequality and distracting the public from potential dangers and the risk others experience), and
17. *profits over people and the environment* (“the corporate bottom line and consumption on the treadmill of production reigns regardless of risk”, perhaps the primary sin?).

Interestingly, the questions Scanlan’s sins are concerned with are not only morally, but also politically contingent. The questions, or rather, the answers accepted and positions taken by different people, are dependent upon ideological presuppositions concerning both how to be a morally virtuous member of society, and how a good society is best formed. This is perhaps most clear when it comes to Scanlan’s sins of “profits over people” and “environmental injustice”. The first of these sins depends upon a certain preference as regards the value spectrum of “greed/solidarity” (or perhaps “/generosity”), while the second seems to be dependent upon an acceptance of a certain (global) conceptualization of distributive justice. Thus, they can both be described as ideological elements, which are rhetorical in the sense that they are based on value judgments that are always subject to debate, rather than on some sort of posited reality.

In our view, Scanlan’s additional sins are of a somewhat different species than TerraChoice’s Sins. They differ in several aspects. Where the seven original sins relate primarily to green marketing as a process of

conformative legitimation, adhering to the values and norms of the institutions of sustainability or climate change, Scanlan's additional sins, instead, work through the processes of selective and manipulative legitimation. In short, the studied companies (the frackers) tend to compensate for their lack of environmental legitimacy by highlighting other institutional norms—and by reframing the understanding of what constitutes a reasonable approach to climate transition, including downplaying risks of climate change or of fracking or hyperbolizing the advantages of the latter. Following the structure presented above, where sins are linked to virtues and problem types, Scanlan tackles a somewhat different type of problem. In fact, the vices he highlights—downplaying the threat of climate change, turning a blind eye to injustices (as a matter of distributive equality), and overemphasizing economic values—are of another species than the original sins. They concern primarily how the problems of climate change and climate transition should be framed.

There is of course an overlap between issues of framing and the already discussed problem type of selection/deflection, as a certain framing entails giving salience to certain aspects while repressing others (Entman 1993; Kuypers 2010). However, Scanlan's additional sins are dependent on ideas about how the overarching phenomena (of climate change and transition) should be described, whereas the original seven sins revolve primarily around how aspects of a company or its products are highlighted or repressed. There can of course be gray areas between these two aspects of green marketing virtues, and a sliding transition between such particularities and more overarching phenomena. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Scanlan's sins address concerns on a higher level of generality than do the original sins.

Excluding some debatable examples emanating from the fossil fuel industry, the frames used within green marketing normally portray climate change as a serious problem and depict some form of climate transition as a (or the) solution. This choice of framing is logical, as it means actors can present themselves as responsibly contributing to solving a serious problem, which is a large part of the explanation why green marketing is booming. Such framing choices are however also of key importance, as they can help effectuate a move toward climate transition. Marketing, including green marketing, has opinion forming effects: it can influence the *doxa* of its recipients. It can thereby contribute to climate transition, as it can by its very existence strengthen the institution of sustainability in general and of climate change in particular. The frames used in green marketing are

thus important. For green marketing to be constructive, or virtuous, however, it is not enough *that* it constructs climate change as a problem and transition as a solution. It is also important *how* the problems, and causes, of climate change are framed, and, perhaps even more so, *how* the responsibility to address, and solve, the problems are represented, as well as which routes toward solving them are presented as not only possible, but indeed suitable and legitimate.

Another important research contribution to our understanding of this problem type is Smercenik and Renegar's (2010) study of British Petroleum's (BP) rhetoric. Their study overlaps thematically with Scanlan's, as they illustrate how BP systematically underscores that climate transition:

- A. must move slowly,
- B. should adhere to a capitalist logic, and
- C. is the responsibility of individuals.

Thus, BP's rhetorical action is in a sense conservative. While it symbolically accepts the need for transition (strengthening the institution), it effectively acts to delay it. This is largely accomplished by portraying *carefulness* as the responsible choice—a virtue that in the petroleum company's version is performed by not doing “too much”, and by not acting “hastily” when facing environmental challenges. The company's rhetoric emphasizes, and iterates, how carefulness is essential to avoid the conceivable dire systemic effects otherwise looming in the shadows. In a sense, it thus advocates for inertia by casting the conservative position as the not only necessary but indeed ethically superior choice.

The question of how climate change and climate transition should be framed is indeed an ethical one, the answer to which also has both substantial political ramifications and significant moral implications. It is also part of the “gray area” where rhetorical action has a purpose to fill. It seems clear that this area of corporate green rhetoric needs nuanced treatment with a sensibility to the different actors and interests at stake. One way to promote the necessary discussion of this aspect of green marketing could be to provide an ethical framework, similar to the 10 (or 11) virtues of green marketing, and to put that framework to use.

There are different possible routes toward providing such a framework. One is to follow the method of flipping sins, in a manner corresponding to what we have done so far. For just as the critical perspective on the sins

and signs of greenwashing can be flipped, to present a constructive framework of virtues, so it would indeed be possible to flip Scanlan's additional sins, as well as the themes implied by Smerecnik and Renegar's rhetorical criticism. Thus, further virtues could be elucidated, and used in rhetorical analysis of green marketing. Scanlan's sins suggest that such a list could highlight, among other things, the importance of presenting climate transition as a matter of urgency, as well as the distributive effects of different measures (distributive justice), and the need to balance the interests of different actors. Smerecnik and Renegar's analysis in turn suggests the importance of taking a critically reflective stance toward the conflicting aims of the capitalist and sustainability paradigms, as well as the importance of presenting a balanced view on the responsibility of various actors. These issues call for interdisciplinary treatment. They reach further than the realm of rhetoric. Even if we would limit ourselves to studying rhetoric or the norms of discourse, any real attempt to formulate a more fully developed framework along the lines sketched here would no doubt require further research. In fact, the question of how to best frame climate change and climate transition to facilitate sustainability could arguably be described as the core question of the entire field of climate communication and climate transition rhetoric. That being the case, we will not inquire much further into these questions here. Instead, we only emphasize that this is an important area for further research and suggest the continued relevance of the general virtues from classical rhetoric, such as justice and wisdom, clarity, and correctness.

It should also be noted that the framework provided by flipping the greenwashing sins, or by adjusting the general virtues of classical rhetoric to the marketing situations of today, are not—in our view—the most important contributions of the perspective presented here. Instead, these are found in Chap. 5, where we revisited the rhetorical tradition and as a result highlighted the value of positive *paradeigmata*. Of course, one can present an analytical framework, and from that derive a few guidelines on how to constructively frame the problems of climate change and the challenges of climate transition. However, the cultural complexity of the question suggests that it cannot be resolved once and for all, and when we acknowledge this, the ethical model of Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian arguably presents a reasonable way forward, in focusing on understanding public rhetoric as the performance of ethical judgment. Such performance should always be scrutinized—not primarily to find faults but, perhaps

more importantly, to find role models, good examples, and that which is worthy of imitation.

In summary, we acknowledge that the framing of climate change, and climate transition, is of key importance in ethically constructive green marketing. We could develop frameworks for tackling the complex issues associated therewith. However, theoretical frameworks must always be simplifications, in relation to the complexity of the real challenges at hand—the ones to be theorized about. Otherwise, the frameworks will become overly intricate labyrinths, rather than helpful tools for analytical work. It also seems that the most important developmental avenue is to provide places (topics, as well as forums) and tools for communal reasoning and for the evaluation of exemplars. We should ask not, what are the general rules for a constructive framing of climate change and climate transition within green marketing, but instead, what are the best examples of such marketing, and what could be learned from them in order to push the frontier further. Interestingly, such a logic already has a place within the area of marketing, as prizes and awards to marketing campaigns are indeed an intricate part of the functioning of marketing production as a social system.

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Some Implications for Law

Abstract This chapter argues that the current regulatory framework is focused on the legal equivalent of sins, and discusses how virtue analytics can support legal development by supplying possible new criteria for legal assessment. We maintain, however, that regulatory development can only ever be part of the solution and that several simultaneous and mutually reinforcing shifts are necessary, for there to be a true shift in green marketing practice.

Keywords Norms and sins • The bad man • Law and topics • Good marketing practice

7.1 ON POSSIBLE VENUES FOR LEGAL DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned, this book emanates from an interdisciplinary endeavor originating in the fields of law and rhetoric, utilizing perspectives from both fields in service of a common goal (cf. Mossberg 2020 and in general e.g. White 1985; Berger 2010). We might also recall that the approach entailed by the constructive turn fits well with the tendency of legal discourse to attempt to address practical problems through feats of social engineering and, in particular, by developing the regulatory frameworks. Critical evaluation of the current frameworks, including articulating

possible new criteria for legal assessment, provides a means for such development. This is where the virtues come in. Currently, the relevant legal criteria are generally formulated in the negative: They highlight deception, manipulation, and unfairness as factors that can make green promises legally problematic (prohibited, and possibly punished). If, for example, an advertisement espousing the “greenness” of a product is deceptive, the advertisement can be deemed a prohibited and unfair commercial practice, pursuant to the EU Directive on Unfair Commercial Practices or any of its national implementations, such as the Swedish Marketing Act (*Marknadsföringslagen* 2008: 486). Note that, while we, being Swedes, here refer to an EU context and use Swedish law as an example, the questions treated have broader implications. A shift of focus could in principle be productive in many different jurisdictional contexts; it could imply developmental avenues for a more effective green legal framework, perhaps even more generally outside the realm of marketing law.

As a parenthetical example, intended to illustrate the primarily negative focus, it might here be mentioned that the Swedish Marketing Act does in fact state that “Marketing shall conform to good marketing practice” (Article 5). The Swedish wording (“Marknadsföring ska stämma överens med god marknadsföringssed”) ends with “sed”, which can also be translated as “mores”—with the same root as morality. The Act hence directs attention to something to aspire to, rather than just something to avoid. However, deviating from good marketing practice does not in itself mean that one’s marketing efforts are legally prohibited. A supplementary test of “unfairness” (“otillbörlighet”) is necessary (pursuant to Article 6). Even if an instance of marketing is deemed “unfair”, that does not mean that it is also legally prohibited. That requires an additional discretionary assessment (pursuant to the prohibition rule in Article 23; see generally about the rules, e.g. Bernitz 2020; Svensson et al. 2010; and on the EU context e.g. Durovic 2016). Hence, the apparent focus on good practice is somewhat misleading, as it is only part of a larger system of legal technicalia which focuses more on the negatives to avoid (unfairness, which should also be prohibited), than on the good practices to aspire to. It should also be noted that, as a matter of legal methodology, the requirement to conform to good marketing practice is normally considered subsidiary to other prohibitions of the Act. There are thus primary provisions, such as the prohibition of misleading marketing in Article 10 (e.g. Bernitz 2020; Svensson et al. 2010), and this reinforces the impression that the focus is first and foremost on the negative.

Now, even without deferring to the conventionally established distinction between the *is* and the *ought*, one might ask: Does it have to be like this? We believe that the negative focus has become part of the naturalized myths of legal discourse in a way that supplies cognitive legitimacy to the negative, in a sense fault-finding, approach. As an available mythical basis of legal argument (cf. Bengtson 2012), this naturalized myth is general: it has sway far beyond the scope of marketing law. No doubt, the negative focus, in part, follows from the fact that it ties in well with fundamental conceptions of the basic freedoms of persons—as regards to promissory utterances and marketing efforts, especially the freedom of speech. The basic idea would be that anything not expressly forbidden should be considered permitted and that only behavior, including speech, of a more “destructive” kind should be forbidden (cf. e.g. Heide-Jørgensen 2017). The implication is that the paradigm of the regulatory framework is some sort of Holmesian “Bad Man” (Holmes 1897): A staple of legal thinking, a cynical character, unbothered by the trappings of conventional morality, a selfish person whose dishonest machinations need to be predicted and thwarted by the legal system.

A focus mainly on the negative means that the law is in a sense always playing catch-up and being caught up in trying to discourage unwanted behavior, rather than being able to encourage the opposite desired behavior more directly. (Thus far, our argument in this section is of course a massive simplification, hinged on a deliberately one-sided perspective—as the discouragement mechanisms are part of a larger, massively complex apparatus designed to guide practical action in many different ways, degrees, and directions—but, please, bear with us, as we have an idea that we want to develop.)

A shift of focus along the lines of the constructive turn, from the vices of green marketing to its possible virtues and to more commendable examples, can provide new argumentative potential and, in effect, new ways to argue in legal contexts. It can also be a means of developing argumentative potential already inherent in legal discourse. By expounding law’s less observed potentialities, it is possible to elucidate suppressed argumentative patterns, in effect supplying alternative norms, or at the very least alternative evaluative criteria. Expressed in terms of rhetorical theory, a shift of focus can provide new *topoi* for lawyers to argue on and for legal decision makers to consider in their decisions. (On topical rhetoric, see e.g. Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969; Gabrielsen 2008; on topics in a legal context, see e.g. Viehweg 1953; Balkin 1996; Mossberg

2020.) Such a topical novelty seems legitimate, as, in principle, there is no reason for the law to focus one-sidedly on the bad apples when a comparison with more virtuous examples can provide just as effective regulatory and determinatory guidance.

A focus on the commendable, rather than on the reprobate, is also at least partly conformable with some of the so-called *soft law instruments* applicable to marketing efforts, such as ethical rules and guidelines of the industry. The characterization “soft” follows from the fact that soft law rules are not in themselves “binding”—unlike “hard law” rules, such as statutory provisions, which are by definition binding within their jurisdiction. However, soft law instruments can sometimes be taken into account when applying hard law rules—for example, when ascertaining what is to be considered good marketing practice, in the sense of the aforementioned Marketing Act. Thus, the soft law instruments can provide openings for a more positive, and constructive, focus, as it builds on what is already accepted within the legal framework, understood in a wide sense.

For example, the ICC Advertising and Marketing Communication Code, which is one of the main soft law instruments relevant to marketing, states, in Article D1, that environmental marketing communication should involve *honest and truthful representations*, which correlates to some of the sins of greenwashing (mostly obviously the sin of fibbing). This provides a beachhead that could be used as a landing stage in ascribing legal relevance to the virtues of green marketing, by building on intellectual structures already positioned within law’s empire. A progressive development, focusing on virtues, could connect to the greenwashing discussions and utilize the spectrum from sins to virtues by taking account of the criticisms and articulations of the concrete problems associated with green marketing, as well as the ethical values to aspire to. This could provide new topoi and ways of sharpening the precision of the rules and the way they are applied. Here, this is only intended as a hopefully illustrative example of a place where the argumentative potentialities of law might be developed by considering the virtues. Correlating green marketing virtues, on the one hand, with the demands of the soft law instruments, on the other, seems to us to be a worthwhile research task in itself, a separate task, which cannot possibly be accomplished within the limits of this book. However, performing such a study might very well reveal opportunities to further develop both the regulatory framework and the theoretical framework for green promises. It thus seems like a promising avenue for further research.

Further, even if, as a matter of legal rhetoric and analysis, we would keep the focus on the negative and thus continue to “encourage the good” merely indirectly by “prohibiting the bad”, the virtues can still be helpful. Namely, because a way of ascertaining “the bad” could be to compare an evaluated instance of marketing (e.g. an advert) with “the good”, in the sense of the ethical standards supplied by the virtues of green marketing. This would be similar to the apparent method of the aforementioned statutory rule stating that marketing should conform to good marketing practice. As already implied, this possibility entails that a framework building on the virtues could guide the application of already established prohibitory norms. This framework can supply argumentative and analytical topoi, which can legitimately be taken into account, especially when there is already-accepted argumentative scaffolding available, such as hard law, which provides a bridge to soft law instruments in turn providing a bridge to the virtues.

7.2 REGULATORY DEVELOPMENT IS ONLY PART OF THE SOLUTION

The prevalence of greenwashing criticism suggests that the need for regulatory development is both present and pressing (cf. e.g. Scanlan 2017). Regardless of its validity, widespread criticism can effectively serve to delegitimize the phenomenon being criticized, as it fosters cynicism and distrust. Indeed, researchers have warned us about “the alarming cynicism being displayed by consumers about green products” and how “green marketing will not work in the face of consumer distrust” (Peattie and Crane 2005; cf. e.g. Tan et al. 2016). Given the possible constructive effects of green marketing—in strengthening the institutions of climate change and the need for climate transition, as well as to guide consumption in more sustainable directions—efforts to strengthen, or at the very least maintain, the legitimacy of green marketing thus seem appropriate.

Now, it is of course easy to state that the responsibility for such efforts should fall on the actors doing the marketing, as they are the ones who stand to benefit. However, in our view, we all stand to benefit from the opinion-forming effects of green marketing. To us, this seems to be the primary societal value of green marketing as a form of public rhetoric. Encouraging the productive epideictic effects of green marketing (rather than merely shaming corporations engaged in said practice) appears to be

not only appropriate but indeed necessary. The positive epideictic effects constitute the main reason why green marketing can be considered a legitimate, or even commendable, societal practice, and not just a tolerated legitimization practice aimed at padding the bottom line of “greedy” corporations. These epideictic effects are also the main rationale for developing the regulatory framework in a way that fosters ethical green marketing, and by extension, the legitimacy of green marketing as an integrated part of a sustainable society.

So, how could a transformation along these lines become reality, and actually make it off the drawing board? For starters, we need to widen our views on possible agents and arenas for change. This widening is consistent with our cross-disciplinary approach. We move relatively freely between the realms of law and seemingly non-legal rhetoric. Though often treated as separate, in our view, these two regions are communicating vessels. Recollecting our earlier treatment of the concept of legitimacy within institutional theory (Chap. 3), it can be noted that organizations are not only regulated by hard law. They are also guided by more loosely formed societal norms and expectations, as well as various soft-law regulations (such as ethical standards and codes of conduct). Combined, these elements of societal institutions shape our common understanding of what is perceived acceptable and desirable organizational behavior. Importantly, however, organizations are not only receptive. Through their own conduct, they can provide a benchmark, and through manipulative legitimization practices, they can target the norms of an institution. They can thereby take part in (re)negotiating the societal norms that they themselves must adhere to.

A change of the institutional demands on an organization can begin in various parts of the system and be driven by various types of actors. The formal legislature, albeit clearly an important driver of change, does not hold a monopoly on supplying the norms guiding societal practices, and, as legislating is by its very definition a political enterprise, societal norms and values are obviously important, as they both supply and constrain the real-world opportunities of the legislator.

Returning to classical Athens, we could make use of the concept of *nomos*, which is of equal importance for scholars of rhetoric and law. Interestingly, the classical Greek word *nomos* (νόμος) denotes written laws as well as social customs and traditions. This implies something about their view of society and law. While the Greeks acknowledged the need for common norms for a sustainable society, the holistic conceptualization of

that norm system, implied by the inclusive meaning of *nomos*, illustrates that *culture constitutes a whole*. The negotiation, and continual re-negotiation, of *nomos* is not limited to courts or a small group of legislators. Instead, it extends to all practitioners of public discourse. Change can therefore start in any part of the nomic system that regulates behavior. The best possibility for change, however, arises if several similar transformations of expectations occur simultaneously. Hence, the discussion on how to best facilitate a constructive turn in green marketing to impact society should include voices from several different sectors of society and academic fields. Admittedly, we point to the realm of soft law as a potential driver of change, both directly in the realm of practice and indirectly by influencing the hard law application of the formal judicial system. However, a structural change, a truly paradigmatic shift in green marketing, can only occur when mutually reinforcing shifts take place simultaneously across different parts of the system.

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CHAPTER 8

The Framework of Virtue Critique

Abstract This chapter continues building on the virtue framework by supplying five analytical principles for virtue critique. They concern rhetorical situationality, motives, effects, audiences, transparency, and prudence, and they provide not only conceptual scaffolding but also key perspectives for performing in-depth studies of green marketing.

Keywords Rhetorical situation • Audience construction • Multiple audiences • Second persona • Constitutive rhetoric

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In the three final chapters, we will further elaborate on the virtue framework. First, in Chap. 8, we present analytical principles for doing virtue criticism that are anchored in contemporary rhetorical theory. Then, in Chap. 9, we illustrate how the framework can be operationalized by engaging in substantive discussions within three areas of green marketing. The tenth and final chapter re-emphasizes that green marketing can be viewed, and judged, as the manifest performance of ethical judgment, and discusses interdisciplinary avenues for future research.

8.2 ANALYTICAL PRINCIPLES FOR VIRTUE CRITIQUE

In some ways, the idea that green marketing should be seen as the public performance of ethical judgment, and primarily appraised as such, is revolutionary. It constitutes an ethical turn in relation to a scientific descriptive-oriented understanding of communication, as well as to a critical tradition focusing on revealing hidden manipulation. At the same time, all the fundamental components to perform such rhetorical criticism are already in place. Since rhetorical scholarship has been persistently haunted by the curse of dealing with an “immoral” art, many have grappled with ways to anchor an understanding of human communication ethically, without relapsing into some form of ethical universalism or mathematical utilitarianism. Interestingly, a significant amount of the perspectives active in a rhetorical understanding of ethics is also present in the practice of law. This is of little surprise, however, as the different fields are historically related and have shared roots in the Greco-Roman tradition. Now, we will introduce five guiding principles, building on rhetorical theory and developing our understanding of green marketing practices, facilitating the analytical assessment of its virtues.

8.2.1 Principle 1—*The Principle of Situationality*

First, a key principle for the virtue framework is that *green marketing is situationally framed*. While the virtue list constitutes a list of norms that goes beyond any particular situation, the interpretation of each virtue, and norm, must be done in relation to a particular situation. Of course, it is possible to reflect—in the abstract—on how one could deem or judge the ethics of certain types of communicative choices in certain types of situations, but such reasoning must always be a stand-in for actual judgment in specific cases.¹

To discern the key aspects of the rhetorical situation that prompted an instance of green marketing, we can go to the standard theory introduced by Lloyd Bitzer (1968), stating that the *rhetorical situation* consists of:

¹This point is, at least in part, parallel with the idea that many legal scholars, who aim to further the normal science of legal doctrinal work, by explicating the Law from the sources, are in a sense trying to act as if they were stand-ins for real judges—thus performing “air law” in effect contributing to the law in much the same way as an air guitarist contributes to music (Schlag 2009).

- A. an *exigence*, which is understood as an imperfection in the world that calls for action,
- B. a *rhetorical audience*, which is both the target of the discourse and a mediator of change with the capacity to respond to the exigence, and finally
- C. the *constraints* of the situation, i.e. the conditions that determine the rhetorical choices available and shape how the chosen rhetoric will perform its communicative function.

Bitzer's conceptualization provides a way of locating rhetorical texts in situations and of viewing them as pragmatic. In other words, they are seen as discursive acts, emerging in real, historical circumstances, but including agency as the rhetors are understood as arguing for change within the situations identified.

8.2.2 *Principle 2—The Principle of Multiple Motives*

While the conceptualization of rhetoric as situational includes a sort of *intention*, it is not analytically located in the mind of individuals but rather manifested in the relation between the exigence, the rhetorical text, and the rhetorical audience. As analysts, we ascertain intention by considering the dynamic interrelation between text form and our understanding of society. In fact, following Kenneth Burke (1969), intention is better conceptualized as a motive that manifests itself in the text. (Note the implicit rhetorical ontology.)

When studying marketing, we can normally take for granted that there is a *commercial motive* behind the marketing act corresponding to a commercial exigence (such as the aim to establish legitimacy in a certain market or to sell certain products). Indeed, marketing can pertain to other exigencies, such as the need to tackle climate change. However, these other motives, related to an ambition of “making the world a better place”, are not as deeply rooted in the tradition of marketing. Marketing is primarily a phenomenon of commercial enterprise, subject to the internal logic of market economy. Hence, it is crucial for green marketing to become legitimate as a societal practice to establish these other non-commercial motives as real and not mere shadow play. In other words, the marketing performances must respond to exigencies related to sustainability and not just to crass commercial interests. Otherwise, the standard objection would be that addressing climate change within commercial

rhetoric should be understood as a purely symbolic gesture: just another form of “corporate bullshit”, functioning as an argument in the service of commercial goals.

In Chap. 3, Sect. 3.2, we mentioned that there is a need to better understand how the institutional logics of capitalism and market economy intersect with the societal institution of sustainability, and how this is manifested in rhetorical practice. Indeed, any commercial text from an organization that strives for societal legitimacy (which, arguably, all organizations do) could be construed as situated within a sort of magma of various motives (cf. Rosengren 2014). Burke (1969) illustrates the complex nature of rhetorical motives, by acknowledging that the actions of a shepherd may imply the motive of caring for the welfare of his sheep, and the motive of commercial profit that follows from his position within the meat production industry.

To summarize the reflections thus far, an important principle of virtue criticism, following the principle of situationality, is that *motives can be multiple, and they are constituted through the interplay between the situational characteristics and the manifest rhetoric.*

8.2.3 Principle 3—The Principle of Multiple Effects

Having treated the exigence and the question of intention—or motive—or situational, let us now turn to the rhetorical concept of the *audience*. In fact, the centrality of this concept, to the classical as well as the contemporary understanding of rhetoric, can hardly be exaggerated. The audience is the frame of reference that differentiates a rhetorical understanding of argumentation from other paradigms, such as logic, or dialectics (e.g. van Eemeren et al. 2014). Further drawing on Bitzer’s conceptualization, the rhetorical audience can be understood as the target audience with the capacity to affect change in relation to the exigence. This aspect is relevant to how the virtue framework can be used to analyze green marketing as it can affect the process of delimiting the relevant audience(s) to be used as a frame of reference when appraising the ethical qualities of marketing.

A similar strategy is used within marketing law where a construction of the relevant audience is used when judging whether a certain commercial practice (i.e. an instance of marketing) should be deemed prohibited or not. This construct is taken to be the consumers who are addressed by marketing efforts. Importantly, however, when broadening our understanding of marketing to include the institution of sustainability, we can

see that the notion of rhetorical audience becomes more complex as there is a correspondence between a multiplicity of exigencies, a multiplicity of motives, and a multiplicity of rhetorical audiences. The link between commercial exigence, commercial motive, and commercial audience is crucial when assessing the ethical dimensions of green promises. However, in terms of discussing the constructive potential of green marketing, one can consider the link between sustainability exigence, sustainability motive, and the related rhetorical audience to be of equal importance. In evaluating the virtues manifested in rhetoric, it is not only, and perhaps not even primarily, a question of not misleading the commercial target group. To be virtuous, the rhetoric should also contribute to the good of society beyond the commercial transaction of two parties. Hence, the pragmatic way of conceptualizing the audience, as a group that can contribute to affecting desirable change, remains relevant as it provides a dynamic, context sensitive frame of reference for ethical judgment.

Indeed, the dynamic nature of the audience as a frame of reference for appraising marketing lies in its connection to various exigencies. However, it also lies—and here we add another nuance—in the fact that an audience can be deemed as rhetorically related to an exigence on two primary levels. First, the speaker can aim to directly affect the actions of the audience (urging it to act in specific ways, e.g. to buy a particular product). Second, the actions of the audience can be influenced more indirectly, as rhetoric can be constitutive of a particular kind of citizen, which can be molded through a rhetoric conditioning certain values and promoting certain identities (e.g. Charland 1987). Such indirect influences do not directly affect change by guiding the immediate action of the audience. Instead, it is preparatory, preliminary, and prejudicial: it paves the way for future action in accordance with the values and identities promoted.

With the concept of *second persona*, American scholar of rhetoric Edwin Black (1970) has conceptualized this complex dimension of rhetoric, explicitly addressing the question of how to make ethical judgments concerning rhetoric. Black's core argument is that, just as a text produces a persona of the author, it also produces a second persona—that of an ideal audience. Black argues that a rhetorical analyst can reconstruct this second persona by analyzing stylistic tokens, such as metaphors. Importantly, this second persona is not to be read as a reconstruction of the intended audience or the rhetorical audience in a Bitzerian sense, but as a construct of discourse that functions rhetorically. The gist of the idea is that, when a text signals that the ideal reader has certain qualities, it has the potential to

affect the real recipients of the text. If car commercials repeatedly describe their cars and their characteristics in terms of wild animals, it could for example imply a second persona characterized by a will to roam free, or a need to feel the thrill of the hunt. Consequently, over time, a real audience could be driven toward accepting such ideals as their own.

A similar rhetorical logic has been developed by Canadian rhetoric scholar Maurice Charland (1987) in his discussions of *constitutive rhetoric*. He argues that rhetoric should not only, or even necessarily primarily, be understood as a medium for producing specific changes in terms of desired actions. Instead, it should be seen as constituting the audience in certain ways. There lies a potential in this often-neglected function of rhetoric, as the constitution of the citizens is central to the formation of a good society.

Thus, we come to the third principle within the virtue framework: *the (constructive) effects of green marketing lie both in its direct effects, guiding consumption, and in the way that it constitutes the identity and characteristics of the audience.*

8.2.4 Principle 4—The Principle of Multiple Audiences

The constitutive effects of marketing are generally considered difficult to regulate or prohibit (though there are attempts to ban e.g. the commercial use of certain demeaning stereotypes). In terms of a qualitative rhetorical critique that discusses the best examples and the virtues of good marketing, however, it is very much reasonable to include this aspect. Returning to Black, we find that one of his key arguments is that we—as humans—do not have a natural capacity to judge *texts* on an ethical scale, as our ethical norm systems are centered on *humans*. Our value systems are based on notions of ethical actors, and, as objects lack agency, ethical assessments of objects must stumble. Black's notion of the second persona is tailored to address this problem. Following this line of thought and returning to marketing, the notion of the second persona makes it possible to better judge the ethical qualities of green marketing. The idea is that you assess the ethical qualities of the text by assessing the audience that the rhetoric is implicitly directed at and therefore—at least potentially—contributes to the construction of.

For example, one of our students applied the framework of constitutive rhetoric to the (rather energetic) green marketing of Oatly, a company selling various oat-based food products. She could thus show how the audience was constituted as not only environmentally aware, but also as

socially conscious, culturally avant-garde, self-ironic, and urban, in contrast to a rural, conservative, and anti-social identity construction. In fact, Oatly explicitly states that they aim to change societal norms toward more sustainable lifestyles, focusing particularly on plant-based food consumption. Such rhetoric could, on the one hand, be considered as constructive and virtuous in the sense of supporting climate transition. On the other hand, the social polarization apparent in Oatly's praise-and-blame rhetoric, particularly regarding the critical characterization of the groups not part of their customer base (the Others), could just as well be considered as potentially destructive rhetoric, as it could have a negative impact on cultivating broad support for climate transition.

Regardless of the interpretation of any specific companies' efforts as regards constitutive rhetoric, it is clear that the audience-constitutive dimension deserves attention in a qualitative assessment of the ethics of green marketing.

Thus far, we have focused on the *pragmatic value* of the audience and demonstrated how an ethical appraisal of green marketing requires a nuanced understanding of the motives of marketing, as well as of the potential effects of marketing on an audience. Within the rhetorical tradition, there are, however, also other normative logics available, which do not focus on the pragmatics of rhetoric (what rhetoric *does*). For instance, there is a lively discussion on the inherent qualities (or lack of qualities) of rhetorical texts in their various forms (which focuses on what and how they *are*). Interestingly, the conceptualization of the audience has been central to this discussion as well, and we can draw from that discussion to further develop the fourth analytical principle.

The Platonic dialogues contain some of the original archetypes for the derision of rhetoric. Therefore, it is interesting to note how Plato's scorn is based on emphasizing the simple ("dumb") nature of the *demos* addressed, as well as the banality that necessarily follows from the temporal constraints of a public speech. To him, rhetoric is inferior partly due to the inferiority of the audience. As a contrast, Plato tends to acclaim the merits of dialectics, by highlighting the value of dialogue with the very brightest of minds. Like diamonds, these minds can help sharpen the quality of the argumentation. (This not very subtle way of stroking the egos of his interlocutors is but one example of how Plato's Socrates tended to use rhetorical means, in positioning himself against teachers of public speaking.)

In many ways this negative positioning of rhetoric (though somewhat sidestepped by Aristotle) has endured in the Western tradition. In 1958, however, Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca published the *Traité de l'argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique* (translated to English in 1969, as *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation*), presenting a new rhetoric that, despite building mainly on Aristotle, presents a new attempt at breaking the Platonic curse. Interestingly, their approach can be adapted for our purposes. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca adhere to Plato and accept that the quality of the rhetoric can be appraised by taking the quality of the audience into account. However, they have their own take on how to do it. Their defense against the platonic criticism is based on the notion that the qualities of rhetoric (as regards ethics, morality, and truth, as well as more technical aspects) can be protected through the simultaneous targeting of two audiences: the particular audience and a universal audience.

The idea of targeting *the particular audience* is easy enough to understand—it is very similar to what most laymen would likely think of in terms of audience adaptation. The basic idea is transmitted in an age-old Swedish proverb: “one should speak to farmers in farmers’ ways and to learned men in Latin”. Expressed in Bitzerian terms, the proverbial wisdom is simply that the characteristics of the audience should be considered as part of the situational constraints. *The universal audience*, on the other hand, is a more abstract, less commonsensical concept. The universal audience is generally described as consisting of all rational beings and as being oriented toward questions of facts and truth, while the particular audience, which is constituted by any specific segment of humanity, is concerned with values and what is preferable according to them (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958; Perelman 1979; Gross 1999; cf. Mossberg 2020; Wintgens 1993).

Taking inspiration from this perspective, two things are particularly important for our present purposes: Firstly, both the universal and the particular audience must be understood as, in a sense, *imaginary constructs*. When evaluating the quality of rhetoric in relation to a particular audience or a universal audience, we do not empirically measure actual effects on real humans. Instead, we critically discuss the rhetoric in relation to an imagined audience with certain qualities. Secondly, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s conceptualization of the rhetorical audience(s) provides a way of adding another normative reference point beyond the particularity of the target audience.

One way to utilize such an audience theory would be to evaluate instances of green rhetoric in terms of both how they appeal to the particular target audience and how they appeal to the universal audience as described by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. Some critics, however, have argued that, through the concept of the universal audience, a lightly disguised platonic conception of (divine) universal truths is slipped back into rhetoric (Cassin 1990). The critics claim that the neutralization of platonic criticism comes at the cost of buying into a problematic idealism.

There is no reason for us to take a stance in this particular debate here. Instead, our main problem, with Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's conceptualization of the audience, is that they clearly align with the Aristotelian paradigm—constructing and evaluating rhetoric in relation to specific situations without taking the social dynamic character of society into account (cf. Chap. 4, Sects. 4.2 and 4.3). When we adapt the idea of dual audiences to our project, however, we do so against the backdrop of a different rhetorical paradigm (cf. Chap. 5, Sect. 5.3).

Returning to the understanding of the ideal audience, our view is that it is not enough to tell marketers to also target and adapt to their own idea of what would be persuasive to all rational beings. Instead, we want to promote a more defined *supervisory audience*. We suggest that this audience should be understood in terms of a (constructed) knowledgeable audience of experts relevant to the subject area of the specific marketing campaign, as well as to the virtuous practice of green marketing.² Simply put, an advertiser of wind energy could ask questions such as: “Would an expert on wind energy, and an expert on the energy market, accept this way of formulating this ad?” or “Would a person knowledgeable in good green marketing practice accept this way of formulating this ad and deem it as transparent and constructive?”

This approach is admittedly less general than the idea of the universal audience, but it is also a less abstract, idealized, and self-contained construct. The approach is however not incompatible with Perelman's ideas. In his terminology, this would be dubbed an *elite audience*, a variant of the universal audience that he considered to be not only a realistic, but indeed an oftentimes fully legitimate substitute for the universal audience (cf. Perelman 1979). While we prefer speaking of a supervisory, or specialist, audience, as that terminology better signifies the function and relevant

²One way of practically implementing such an audience function is to develop systems with sustainability standards, a theme developed in Chap. 9, Sect. 9.2.

characteristics of the audience (know-how, rather than position), we embrace this realistic variant. A specialist supervisory audience can fill in for the universal audience and perform part of the same practical functions without, however, falling into the trap of reinstating a divine audience (cf. Cassin 1990). While still being a construct, the reference (or meaning) becomes clearer if one imagines this version of an ideal audience consisting of researchers and experts within a particular area, relevant to a certain area of green marketing. Now, one could of course interject and state that this would not be a universal audience, but a particular one, an admittedly specialist but still merely particular audience—and one would be right! In a sense. However, the key here is that we should strive to appraise marketing in relation to both a particular target audience—the persons targeted by advertisers, the consumers, and whatnot—and a constructed, qualitatively ideal audience, with specialist knowledge about the things at hand and a critical, supervisory function.

What is more, we should aim to form actual audiences, within the market system, with real people who embody the judgment of the ideal audience. Sometimes, this function could be supplemented, or even replaced, by various practices and documents to help marketers and analysts fill the notion of a supervisory audience with substance and to put it to work. Doing so would enable marketers considering the judgment of this ideal audience to have a particular audience in mind. In one way, what we here argue for is *the institutionalization of a supervisory audience for virtuous green marketing practice*. In some jurisdictions, this could be accomplished by developing already present supervisory functions, such as the Swedish Advertising Ombudsman (*Reklamombudsmannen, RO*), a non-governmental organization which, as part of the industry self-regulation system, “receives complaints about advertising and reviews whether commercial advertising is compliant with the ICC Marketing Code”, thereby guiding marketing practice.

Integrating an appraisal by an institutionalized audience within the system of marketing could aid the move toward sustainable marketing and a sustainable society. More specifically, judgments that consider both the rhetorical audience and the supervisory audience could be built into, for example, the critical assessments of marketing efforts performed by marketing professionals, or by self-regulation institutions (such as the RO), and indeed by the courts. There are already promising instances of this kind of thinking out there, in different places and different forms, but to develop further they need nourishment and nurture. There is a need for

analytical work and practical applications, as well as mediation between the fields of theory and practice.

Hence, we have our fourth principle: *the ethics of green marketing should be appraised in relation to rhetorical audiences, as well as in relation to a qualitatively ideal audience taken to consist of relevant experts*. We will return to how this dynamic between the layman audience of the (average) consumer, an expert audience, and the marketing at hand can be construed in the following Sect. 8.3.

8.2.5 Principle 5—*The Principle of Prudence and Transparency*

The question of what constitutes virtuous green marketing is not a merely factual matter, but on the contrary a matter of judgment. Of course, there are instances of green marketing that clearly constitute what one could call greenwashing and which therefore falls into the “bad” category. Most green marketing efforts, however, in all probability have both merits and demerits. As implied by the five (or six) “ethical problem types” and the 10 (or 11) virtues of green marketing (Chap. 6, Sect. 6.2), green marketing requires *prudence*. In this context, prudence means both an active awareness of and amenability to what is situationally appropriate, as the considerations required are complex, and a sound judgment, as trade-offs will inevitably be necessary. In terms of, for example, selection and deflection, it is impossible to provide “all” information, deflecting nothing. Green marketing will inevitably require choices, and determining what is virtuous will require reasoning.

In the following chapters, we explore various topics supporting the performance and analysis of the ethical judgments involved in green marketing. At this point, we will not dive deeper into the question of prudence or practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Instead, we simply make an addition, albeit an important one: Beyond choices relating to the presentation of the subject matter of a green marketing campaign (such as aspects related to the sustainability of the product or company), we should consider if *there is transparency with regard to the rhetorical nature of the marketing*. An ethical quality of green marketing could well be its rhetorical openness, in the sense of being transparent with its own rhetoricity—with what it does and does not do, in terms of rhetoric (cf. Bengtson 2019). In other words, the ideal of green marketing should not be to hide the traces of rhetorical maneuvering. Instead, the ideal should be to openly admit its rhetoricity, where this is possible and suitable—as, indeed, it is to a much

larger extent than implied by present green marketing practice. In one way, this might seem like a recommendation counter to the very function of rhetoric as persuasion and therefore seem idealistic, unrealistic, or just plain naive.

There are, however, two reasons why this must not be so. First, when a marketer is transparent, in relation to a target audience, in terms of how the rhetoric is formed, this can build trust and establish a reliable ethos, as the company, by its parrhesia (the rhetorical figure of speaking candidly), shows arete (virtuous character), eunoia (goodwill), and trust in its audience, inviting a reciprocal trust. Secondly, during the last two decades it has become more and more clear that the persuasiveness of argumentation is not dependent on its rhetoricity being hidden. This has for example become clear in politics, where political parties and lobbying organizations have come to start commenting and discussing their strategies openly. That the invisibility of rhetoricity is not a condition for persuasiveness finds an especially salient example in the rise of certain forms of post-truth rhetoric. That is, rhetoric where the truth of an argument, or its logical validity, is of little importance, and where the evaluation of arguments will tend to be based on their dramaturgical effects and functions in a struggle over cultural dominance. Returning to the question of green marketing, our fifth analytical principle is that: *the ethics of green marketing is a question of prudence in practical judgments as well as transparency in terms of the rhetorical choices made.*

8.3 FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON AUDIENCE CONSTRUCTION

As promised, we will now elaborate on a particular theme related to defining the rhetorical situation, namely the matter of audience construction, which, as mentioned, is of primary importance when assessing the ethics of communication, including marketing. This primacy is also a matter of methodology. Before you can assess, e.g., the transparency of green marketing, you need to determine the perspective from which this transparency is to be judged. In other words, the question of *how to determine and define the target audience becomes primary.*

As now must be clear, the virtue perspective presented in this book works with a complex, multi-layered concept of audience. We have already discussed the constitutive effects related to the ideals implied by second

persona, and the concept of an expert audience (filling in for Perelman's universal audience; cf. Sect. 8.2). At this point, we wish to expand on the notion of a target audience and consider how perspectives from rhetoric, law, and marketing can be useful tools for conceptualizing it. This constructive process of target audience mapping is of course relevant for an understanding of the expert audience, and for discussing the constitutive effects of marketing, but for the moment, those particular perspectives are left aside.

Our giving primacy to the audience does not mean that we proclaim a preference for any "subjective" interpretation of any particular person or group of persons. The relevant audience—and what we mean by the "target audience"—is the one that is constructed in and by the message. This audience is an "objective" construct in the very same way that the "content" of a message is, as the audience is, by implication, part of the intelligible meaning of a message. We thus work from the proposition that *a message constructs its audience*, and takes this as our point of departure for how to determine and define the target audience.

The proposition that a message constructs its audience could be further illustrated by using any of several established conceptual apparatuses. We could speak of an "implied" (Iser), "ideal" (e.g. White) or "model reader" (Eco), of an "anticipated audience" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca) or "interpellated subject" (Charland), of "the average consumer (in the relevant market)" (EU marketing law), or indeed about "the second persona" (Black), as in the previous Sect. 8.2. The conceptual apparatuses that the quoted phrases allude to are of course not interchangeable; they are part of different fields and theories, and they highlight different points about how messages (texts, speech, images) construct their audiences. As tools, the apparatuses do different work for different enterprises. Still, they have the basic premise in common that messages imply to whom they are addressed, and thus, by way of indication, signify their target audiences. Hence, the theories have in common that they point out, not only that *any communicative act constructs its audience*, but also that *this audience can be extricated through interpretative work that places the act in its context and looks closely at it*.³

³ Admittedly, some of these theories do not explicitly focus on the societal context as a factor in interpretation, but we would argue that some form of context is implied in all of them. For our own approach, emphasizing the importance of understanding rhetoric as part of a societal dynamic, all interpretations are understood as contextually informed.

The implications of a communicative act can of course be more or less clear, and the contextual clues can be more or less illuminating. In some cases, both the message and context clues can be ambiguous (graffiti; wrong number calls; finding a letter someone dropped) while, in other cases, they can be more determinate (journal articles, for example, should normally target the journal's readers, subscriptions holders, or at least a section of them, while school exams should normally address the grading teacher, whether known or anonymous). In some cases, the context clues can even be *prescriptive* in the sense that a certain audience is decreed to be the relevant one—the most obvious example being law, which often simply decrees that in a given case the relevant audience should be considered so and so.

As mentioned, it follows from the EU legal framework regarding marketing that the target audience should be constructed as the “average consumer” or, more precisely, the average consumer whom an instance of marketing “reaches” or “to whom it is addressed” or “the average member of the group when a commercial practice is directed to a particular group of consumers”.⁴ That the relevant addressee is prescribed to be this fictional character—the average consumer—is simple enough. The complicated question however ensues, about how to construct this average character and what “average” qualities to assign. *Who* is this person? How can such a fictional figure be defined? *Where* does this person perform their economic activity? In what *market* or *business sector*? The latter, both as a matter of *type of product* (goods or services, as well as all the different sub-categorizations possible within these categories) and as a matter of *geography*? Further, *how*—in what mode of perception—does the relevant subject perceive an instance of marketing? And for *how long*? A quick glance passing by, or for a longer duration?

We could go on. The point is that the answers to such questions will obviously need to vary. The anticipation of contextual relativity is the very

⁴Directive 2005/29/EC on Unfair Commercial Practices, Art 5.2. This is a bit of a simplification, as other constructed audiences are possible or indeed prescribed in certain circumstances. The Directive is based on an ambition to afford extra protection to vulnerable groups (e.g. children), and it follows from this ambition that the target shall in some cases be constructed differently (e.g. as a child). Generally on the consumer benchmarks in the unfair commercial practices directive, see, for example, Duivenvoorde 2015; cf. Leczykiewicz and Weatherill 2016.

reason for asking them. In fact, the point here—which elaborates on our first analytical principle on how green marketing is situationally framed (Sect. 8.2)—is twofold. One, the demands put on marketing efforts should differ with the answers to such questions. Two, it is pointless (and practically impossible) to try to answer such questions in the abstract. To determine, say, which market is addressed by an instance of consumer marketing, the interpreter needs to look at the specific message to figure out what consumers are targeted as prospective buyers of an advertised product. In other words, it is necessary to adopt a qualitative approach to target audience analysis.

While *the principle of contextual relativity applies universally*, the analytical rendering of that audience will need to vary. The rendering will vary with the text and context, as well as with the analytical perspective, and field within which the analysis is situated.⁵ As different fields will have their own ways of structuring the reasoning of interpretative justifications, they will ascribe importance to different topoi. For example, constructing something as specifically “legal” reasoning will directly affect which topics can legitimately be addressed in the interpretative reasoning, as the prescriptive nature of law puts restrictions upon certain places, while making attendance to others mandatory. In our view, this is merely an effect of the perhaps most basic premise of rhetoric: that a speaker (or critic) should be mindful of the situation and adapt her speech to the audience (or take account of the situational constraints in her critique), a requirement which includes adhering to the expectations of the genre.

Hence, while the audience construction must always be anchored in the situation, and situation analysis is a potentially eternal project, this does not mean that there is nothing general to say on the matter. It only means that the specifics, rather than the generalia, are the primary, conclusory, guides in interpretive practice. However, the specifics of a case will always be viewed in light of more general cognitive frames. Hence, it can still be a meaningful task to elaborate on, and indeed develop, these general analytical structures. It can be a way of articulating possibly helpful and relevant criteria of audience construction. From the perspective of rhetorical

⁵Thus, despite any helpful “suggestions” prescribed by, e.g., the law, the interpretative work that lawyers need to perform will be of the same species as that of many other fields. Hence, as a matter of basic methodology, you must inevitably look to the message and situational context.

theory, it seems natural to construe the results of such elaboration as rhetorical topics, that is, as *general topics of audience construction*. The topics must not, however, be general in an absolute sense. Just as the Aristotelian topics related to the three classical genres of speech, different topics for audience construction can be created in correspondence with various discourses of society or the analytical interests of various fields.

As regards to the assessment of green marketing, such general topics of audience construction could well include the kind of topics which can be taken into account in market surveys, and in what marketing theory regularly refers to as *segmentation*. Marketers often think in terms of market segments when identifying prospective customers (the marks, for their marketing). Therefore, there ought to be correlations between the strategies used for market segmentation, and the factors which are relevant as topics for the construction of a target audience. These correlations speak to the translatability of the strategies. In other words, and taking inspiration from a standard textbook on marketing (Kotler et al. 2020), when trying to work out the characteristics of the target audience, variables, and typical breakdowns such as the following can be taken into account:

- (a) *Geographic segmentation*: What continent, nation, or region is addressed? What is the targeted sales area? Density of population? Climate? (“You don’t sell air conditioning units in Antarctica!”)
- (b) *Demographic segmentation*: What is the target demographic, in terms of e.g. age, generation, and life cycle; gender; family size; stage in life cycle; income; profession; level of academic achievement; and nationality? Are there relevant cultural, or indeed sub-cultural, consumption patterns?
- (c) *Psychographic segmentation*: Is the marketing targeting a particular social group, lifestyle, or personality? Do they have specific views of high relevance? (“I hate wind power!”)
- (d) *Behavioral segmentation*: Is it a special/normal/once-in-a-lifetime occasion? What benefits are sought concerning quality, service, convenience, etc.?; User status: Is the marketing targeting non-users, ex-users, new users, etc.? Frequency of use: Regular users, first-time users, etc.? Loyalty status: Non, medium, strong? Readiness state: Unaware, aware, informed, interested, desirous, intending to buy? Attitude toward the product: Enthusiastic, positive, indifferent, negative, hostile?

These segmentation variables are factors that, according to standard marketing theory, can be taken into account when delineating a market segment to address. They also seem to be utilizable as topics for audience construction, with only minor translation. Hence, when addressing the question of who the target audience is, one can take such factors into account as rhetorical topics, and just like topics, they are not to be applied mechanically (Kotler et al. 2020):

There is no single way to segment a market. A marketer has to try different variables, alone and in combination, to find the best way to view the market structure.

The recorded topics are not the only available ones. On the contrary, this non-exhaustive list can be further developed and indeed should be adjusted as is called for in different situations. The categories can also tend to coincide; it might for example be hard to see if a certain characteristic is geographically or demographically contingent (“In Denmark, people like beer”/“Danes like beer”) or if it should be seen as psychographic or behavioral. (Is an attitudinal alignment a question of a personal psychology, or a matter of acting in a certain way?) If, however, the categories are seen as heuristic aids, rather than as a strictly formal analytic, this is of small consequence—they are meant to help identify relevant characteristics, to make them stand out from the background and thus be more visible. It does not necessarily matter much if it is then hard to “sort” the things one sees into discrete and stable categories. As regards their adjustment, one might, for example, in some situations of consumer marketing want to put more emphasis on factors such as prioritized economic needs, consumption patterns, or travel habits. As concerns business markets, one might focus on variables such as operating characteristics, purchasing approaches, situational factors, and personal and personnel characteristics. However, this would easily be reconcilable with the structure of segmentation categories, if nothing else than due to their elasticity. Such adjustment merely entails the tailoring of one’s abstract analytic to the concrete situation at hand. Many times, such adjustment will simply be required to be able to apply the variables as criteria.

Ascertaining a message’s target audience is however not only a question of delimiting a particular range of subjects in the sense of a particular market segment or group of persons. There can be other dimensions to the

assessment of what is signified by an instance of marketing and thus to the evaluation of its ethical characteristics. It seems less pertinent to pose the question of, for example, linguistic transparency as, “Is this item of green marketing transparent?”, than instead asking: “Is it transparent, to these specific persons?” And adding “when they look at it like this?” makes it even more pertinent, as this last formulation highlights another relevant criterion of audience construction, namely *the implied audience’s mode of perception*.

Taking the audience’s perceptual mode into account obviously entails a more developed analytic, in the sense that it makes explicit mention of a higher number of topics, and there seems to be value in such conceptual elaboration—to a point. In theory, one could enumerate each and every characteristic which can be assigned to a person, but in practice this is neither reasonable nor desirable, as overly complicated analytics defeat their heuristic purposes. Further, if only imagination would set the limits, many imaginable distinctions would likely be irrelevant or overly fine. Further still, aspects of audience construction tend to intermingle in ways that can be completely legitimate. One might well use a more de-differentiated “who-framing” and construct the audience as, for example, “a stressed person browsing through the supermarket”, just as well as on a more differentiated “who-, where-, how- and why-framing”, instead constructing it as “a person, in the supermarket, giving mere cursory attention, due to shortness of time”. In general, both alternatives will seem just as intelligible.

Again, marketing law provides illustration. In decisions regarding whether a commercial practice is to be considered prohibited pursuant to EU legal regime, the “who”-question is normally answered⁶: “An average consumer in the relevant market”. Or, in the more elaborate wording of the European Commission (Notice 2021/C 526/01), the Directive on unfair commercial practices: “takes as a benchmark the average consumer, who is reasonably well informed and reasonably observant and circumspect, taking into account social, cultural and linguistic factors, as interpreted by the Court of Justice”. In its case law, the Court has constructed the average consumer as “a reasonably critical person, conscious and

⁶In some cases, the benchmark is instead tailored to protect particularly vulnerable consumers, such as children.

circumspect in his or her market behaviour”.⁷ This audience construction illustrates the possibility of integrating several characteristics (faculties of criticism, consciousness, circumspection,⁸ etc.) into the formation of the audience subject (the average consumer). It illustrates, not only how the who-question can entail a complicated intersection of several different aspects, but also of how the who-question can integrate elements that might otherwise be systematized as part of a “how”-question. (“Who looks at it?”—“The average consumer”—“And how does the average consumer look at it?”—“With reasonably critical faculties (etc.).”⁹)

The question about whether or not to separate the group of persons from their perceptual mode, or the who from the how, etcetera, is partly a question of mere semantics, and of how a discursive field, for example, an academic field, for field specific reasons, elects to structure its conceptual apparatuses. It is however obvious that as a matter of rhetorical analysis these different aspects, and more, can in fact be differentiated. By doing so, it is possible to point to different topics of audience construction, which can be used when constructing the audience relevant for the assessment of the ethics of green marketing.

It also seems clear that an elaboration of different relevant audience characteristics can provide helpful tools for the analysis of green marketing, and the ethical assessment according to different virtue criteria. As always, the question of *which topoi should be considered relevant is best answered with regard to pragmatic criteria*, but the topics we have listed so far seem to provide a reasonable point of departure.

⁷ Arbitrarily chosen example: Usually, the average consumer will not attribute to goods bearing the marking “dermatologically tested” any healing effects which such goods do not possess, see Case C-99/01, *Criminal proceedings against Gottfried Linhart and Hans Biffl*, 24 October 2002, para. 35.

⁸ Example: The “reasonably circumspect consumer” will not believe that the size of a promotional marking on a package corresponds to the promotional increase in the size of that product, see Case C-470/93, *Verein gegen Unwesen in Handel und Gewerbe Köln e.V. v Mars GmbH*, 6 July 1995, para. 24.

⁹ In fact, national measures which prohibit claims that might deceive only a very credulous, naive, or cursory consumer (such as “puffery”) are prohibited by EU law, as they would be deemed disproportionate, and as such an unjustified barrier to trade (i.e. a restriction on the free movement which is one of the fundamental goals of the Union).

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Exploring the Virtue Framework: Environmental Labels, Clean Clothes, and Green Energy Capitalism

Abstract This chapter is the most extensive chapter in the book. It uses the presented framework of virtue critique to examine the role of environmental labels in green marketing and explore how green rhetoric is used in the marketing of clothes, as well as within the Energy Sector. Themes developed include standardized forms for sustainability communication, communicative efficacy, moral legitimacy, temporality, transparency, and the value of rhetorical spaces for prudent corporate communication on complex matters.

Keywords Environmental labeling • Fast and slow fashion • Energy marketing • Communicating corporate responsibilities

9.1 PUTTING THE FRAMEWORK TO USE

In this chapter, we start putting the framework to use. Applying the framework in more specific discussions provides a way of testing it out, to see how it works as an analytical tool. The discussions further illustrate how we think the framework can be utilized in rhetorical analysis of marketing. We will focus on three different themes. One is a particular kind of sign, a marking of marketing, namely that of environmental labels. The other two are branches of industry, namely clothing and energy. To us, it seems that these three themes provide interesting and illustrative examples. They are

also highly topical in the current discussions on sustainability issues and green marketing. Beyond illustrating the applicability of the virtue approach, the discussions will also indicate particular questions, empirical areas, and theoretical dimensions that would benefit from further scholarly inquiries, or from collaborative works between different actors, including scholars, civil society, public actors, and private enterprises.

9.2 ECOLABELS: THE STRATEGIES AND STRUGGLES OF STANDARDIZATION

Ecolabels have become one of the most common ways of portraying products or companies as green. As indicated by Ecolabelindex, an organization dedicated to tracking ecolabels and maintaining a global directory of them, the number of such labels is ever growing. At the time of writing (the end of 2022) there are 456 different ecolabels in the directory. Ecolabels are standardized labeling systems for primarily food and consumer products. The labels are typically presented on product packaging as a small sign in the form of a standardized icon. The graphic designs of these icons are often colorized in green and/or blue and adorned with a leaf, a flower, or some other motif bearing the semblance of “nature”. Thus, they in a sense evoke it, “triggering ecological inferences subtly by activating implicit references to nature through nature imagery” (Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez 2009; Parguel et al. 2015, on “executional greenwashing”). The icons are regularly accompanied by small print with the name of the label, which often makes mention of a branch of industry (e.g. “produce”, “bio grow”) and their field of relevance or origin (e.g. “global”, “Austrian”, “EU”). Due to the proliferation of ecolabels, such iconography is easily recognizable, and presumably, the reader will know what we are talking about. (In Sweden, it seems almost impossible to go grocery shopping without encountering a bunch of ecolabels, and anyone interested in concrete examples can visit the website of the aforementioned index.)

Ecolabels are part of a wider class of “environmental labels”. There are different categories within this overarching category, which also includes one-sided information about products, that is, labels created and administered by the product’s manufacturers, importers, or distributors themselves, provided that the symbolic means used can be meaningfully

analyzed as a label.¹ The subcategory of “ecolabels”, however, in the sense of the word used here, is a particular form of environmental label, which bears the significance of being a product of *third-party certification processes*. Proper ecolabels are designed to be independent from the producers, in a way intended to secure their objective and trustworthy character.

Environmental labeling practices seem to be inspired by the success of labels regarding quality and product safety. They started out as a marketing instrument, but in time various labels have developed that are now accepted as a governance instrument, or even an instrument of public policy (e.g. Iraldo et al. 2020). The more specific practice of *ecolabeling* seems to have its origin in the work of NGOs, but ecolabels were soon adopted by governments. The German Federal Government was an early adopter, with its “Blauer Engel” label originating in 1978, soon followed by others, like the “Nordic Swan” from 1989 (Prieto-Sandoval et al. 2020 provide a brief overview). Ecolabels now range from private initiatives to semi-official and even official transnational labels, such as the EU Ecolabel, “the official European Union voluntary label for environmental excellence”—nicknamed the “EU Flower” due to its genre typical iconography.

Having noted the broader category of environmental labels, we will here focus primarily on ecolabels, using the EU Ecolabel, as well as other labels, as examples to illustrate how the virtue framework can be put to use and to point out some of the strengths and weaknesses of ecolabeling practices.² Ecolabels are of particular interest from a virtue perspective, for

¹Ecolabels are also closely related to the phenomenon of “green stickers”, which can be viewed as another type of environmental label, with the main difference that the “stickers” constitute information that a company is required to present, sometimes in a very specific visual form. In other words, they are legally mandated. (Note that the terminology will of course vary across different jurisdictions.)

²The EU Ecolabel is a prime candidate for virtue evaluation. In many respects, it is a typical example of an ecolabel, in a way that makes it illustrative of the general category. However, the “Flower” has proven to be *stable* in a way many other ecolabels are not (on the history of the label see e.g. Baldo et al. 2014; Prieto-Sandoval et al. 2020; and cf. Zsolt 2016, who is critical of the *overstability* of the EU Ecolabel, implying that the inefficiency of the EU bureaucracy has stalled change and led to the Flower being overly slow to change even when severe insufficiencies have been identified). The EU Ecolabel is also widely accepted, no doubt in part due to profiting on the ethos of the European Union, which actively works to promote the Flower. As a part of the Union’s single market, the EU Ecolabel is also internationally spread in a way that has interesting consequences. The fact that the Flower is indeed designed to facilitate cross-border trade entails that it must inevitably speak to an amalgamated audience with different cultural norms. Hence, our framework should prove helpful due to its multifaceted construction of the audience.

a number of different reasons. It has been said (by Galarraga Gallastegui 2002) that ecolabels are about furthering two main objectives:

1. to provide consumers with more information about the environmental effects of their consumption, generating a change toward more environmentally friendly consumption patterns, and
2. to encourage producers, governments, and other agents to increase the environmental standards of products/services.

In relation to the first objective,³ *ecolabels constitute a paradigmatic type of green promise*, a type that is characterized not only by its substantive objectives, but also by its stereotypical form, both visually and in terms of the argumentative logic behind it. These characteristics are a large part of the reason why ecolabels are a prime candidate for virtue studies.

Further, the *voluntary character of ecolabel practices provides much room for rhetorical sophistication and marketing maneuvering*. Legally speaking, the use of existing ecolabels is generally governed by contractual regimes, that is, arrangements that are voluntary both as to content and as to whether or not one wants to submit to the regime by accepting the contractual provisions. As a matter of public law the construction and use of ecolabels will largely be considered a matter of freedom of speech, and thus enjoy constitutional protection in a way posing particular demands on regulating their uses (see Chap. 7).

Further still, the way that arguments using ecolabels signal a third-party certification, makes the arguments *prototypically high-risk cases of the “imaginary friends” type of greenwashing sin*, as indeed is illustrated by the fact that there are numerous such examples.⁴

Generally then, ecolabels have both pros and cons, their risks and their rewards. Some of their rhetorical effects are not necessarily by design, in the sense of being intended. They do however follow from the way

³This is one of the main rationales in the discourse of the EU, with statements like: “Through the EU Ecolabel, industry can offer true and reliable eco-friendly alternatives to conventional products, empowering consumers to make informed choices and play an active role in the green transition.” Note the constitutive rhetoric and how it constructs a normative vision of the EU citizen. On the rhetorical formations of European identity, see Schou Therkildsen 2022.

⁴Here, one might recall the tactic of car companies using Self Awards, mentioned in footnote 9.

ecolabels are designed, as they are entailed by *the formal characteristics of the labels*.

Ecolabels are a *standardized form of sustainability measurement*, intended to make it easy to take environmental and other sustainability issues into account in different transactions. As *signifiers of measurement*, some ecolabels will quantify emissions, pollution, or energy consumption by way of scoring indexes (e.g. “Energy Class A”) or units of measurement (“20 kg CO₂ eqv. per unit”). Others will assert compliance with a set of practices (“Best Aquaculture Practices”) or minimum requirements for sustainability or reduction of harm to the environment (“Dolphin Friendly”, “Carbon Reduction”).⁵ Others still will inform consumers about the effects on the environment of the production, consumption, and waste phases of the product or service consumed (“Life cycle approved!”). As this implies, the concrete *standards* used vary, and the set of criteria will sometimes overlap (e.g. Cetik 2011).

The basic significance of an ecolabel is to *signify compliance with a standard secured by evaluation through a certification process*. It is not only the standards that vary. So do the requirements for certification, as well as the schemes for testing. However, for proper ecolabels there is normally some *verification process*, commonly referred to as a “certification”, through which an actor seeking approval must show that their practices are in compliance with some set of criteria. By passing (and paying for) this process, as well as any continued monitoring, the actor earns the right to sell its products as certified, and to adorn them with the ecolabel.

For the corporations applying ecolabels to their products, the appeal often lies in how this works to construct the products as attractive, and by extension the company as an attractive transactional counterparty. Thus, the adoption of a label is often based on the notion that sporting an ecolabel can be a persuasive selling argument, at the very least in relation to a niche, but growing, market segment of environmentally conscious consumers (e.g. Karlsson and Dolnicar 2016; Elamin and de Córdoba 2020). Using an established ecolabel will also be a way of benefitting from the previous marketing efforts of both the certifying body and other actors using the same label (Iraldo and Barberio 2017).

In addition to the rhetorical construction of a product or corporate ethos, ecolabels have other, albeit connected, functions. As already implied, the use of voluntary sustainability standards such as ecolabels can

⁵ For a discussion on typology, see, for example, Galarraga Gallastegui 2002.

be seen as a market-driven form of *governance* (UNCTAD 2021; van der Ven et al. 2018; cf. Zsolt 2016).⁶ This function hinges on the standards used being adequately designed, and that the certification process, as well as any further monitoring and compliance work, is robust enough to be an effective means of encouraging the behavior strived for. The standards will need to be designed in a way *promoting goals that are not only adequately and reliably measurable, but also relevant* (the virtue of relevance). Constructing optimal standards is indeed one of the main challenges when developing ecolabeling schemes, demanding both natural and social scientific perspectives. The criteria will also need to be adjusted over time, in a way that continually balances between on the one hand the pragmatics of what is economically feasible and on the other hand the ideal of what is desirable from a sustainability perspective and of keeping up with what is scientifically possible. As so often, one needs to strike a balance between what would be ideal and what is realistic. This is illustrated by the fact that the governance function of the standards will often be to stimulate and enforce a type of “best practice”, and such practices will inevitably both evolve and be the object of critical discussion.

While acknowledging the importance of developing adequate and reliable standards, and the difficulties inherent in weighing the different interests against each other, here, we focus on *ecolabels as rhetoric*.

The rhetoric of ecolabels is founded on a number of elements, which are combined in a specific way. An aspect that is clearly of interest for a rhetorical study of green marketing is *how ecolabels work as signs, and arguments*. Ecolabels have been called “essential sources of information regarding products’ features” (Hameed and Waris 2018). This is however somewhat misleading, as what is signified is often only indirectly about the product as such. Ecolabeling means that a product, through a sign, *borrow the credibility of an external source*, namely the certifying third party, which is why an argument using an ecolabel is a prototypically high-risk case of becoming an “imaginary friends” type of greenwashing sin.

An interesting example of a problematic “ecolabel” is found in the Sustainable Brand Index (SBI), “Europe’s largest independent brand study focused on sustainability”, which ranks brands based on how they

⁶For an introduction about different kinds of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS: a broader concept which includes other kinds of non-environmentally focused sustainability standards) see, for example, UNCTAD 2021, which also exemplifies how the certification process can be arranged.

“are perceived in terms of sustainability by their important stakeholders” (SBI 2022). The rankings are differentiated by industry (e.g. Clothes & Fashion; Electricity & Heating; Fuel), and high-ranking companies are deemed “Industry Winners” and awarded a badge reminiscent of an eco-label. The badge is designed as a circular icon, with the SBI logotype—a collection of green circles giving the impression of a three-dimensional globe—at the center, and the words “INDUSTRY WINNER 2020” (or whatever year it concerns) making a half circle atop the centered globe, enveloping it, and the words “Sustainable Brand Index” at the bottom.

The index winners can then make mention of their “Wins” in their own later marketing. Swedish petroleum and biofuel company Preem provides an example. The company has made frequent use of the “Industry Winner” award in their marketing. Among other things, Preem has touted it in an “Awards” section on its website’s “Sustainability” section—which also boasts how Preem was hailed as “Sweden’s Greenest Brand” (Swe: “Sveriges grönaste varumärke”) in 2020. Anyone surprised by a petroleum company being the greenest brand in Sweden can click their way further and soon conclude that it was the greenest brand *in the “Fuel” category*. This makes the victory less surprising, and the emphasizing of the thus relatively small victory clearly reminiscent of the “Best in Class” Sign of Greenwashing. (“Declaring you are slightly greener than the rest, even if the rest are pretty terrible.”)

In 2021, Preem lost their standing as the Swedish Industry winner to the competitive petroleum company OKQ8. The loss was likely due to a large amount of negative press coverage reporting on the planned, but publicly criticized and ultimately scrapped, or at least extensively revamped, expansion of the company’s refinery Preemraff, outside of the Swedish coastal town Lysekil. As this implies, *the loss reflected a drop in brand image*. This is central to how the SB-index works. Indeed, it is by design, as the indexed measurements are not directly about sustainability. Rather, the index is about how a brand is *perceived*, by important stakeholders (such as customers). In other words, the index is at best an indirect way of measuring sustainability, as what the winners are rewarded for is effectively their own previous successful PR-work in the sustainability area.

Hence, touting the SBI reward as if it were a certificate of genuine sustainability can be misleading, in much the same way as the “Worshipping False Labels” Greenwashing sin. It is important to note that the problem is not with the index itself. The problem is in how displaying it can be misleading, in signifying some form of oversight or surveillance that the

awarding organization does not provide. Consumers, in general, cannot be expected to be knowledgeable about the low level of actual sustainability surveillance, and thus they are likely to be misled by marketing which uses the SBI award as a promotion without further explanation. In other words, most consumers are likely to interpret it as a token of sustainability. However, the display of the award would be problematic even if targeted customers were in fact aware of the details and inner workings of the SBI. As an argument, touting the award would then work as an appeal to a popular notion or evaluation. Potential customers would be told that, according to a marketing survey, most people find the brand to be the most sustainable (or least unsustainable), and be encouraged to act on this popular notion, rather than on any notions of one's own. The problem thus borders on the Sin of "No Proof". In effect, touting the award encourages an unreflective and dependent judgment, tantamount to the *argumentum ad populum* commonly referred to as the "bandwagon fallacy".

This is but one example of how *labels signaling third-party certifications can be misleading*. It is far from the worst example. It is however a symptom of a wider complex of problems, which are all in and of themselves complicated, and which need to be addressed in several different ways, on different levels. Greenwashing criticism no doubt has a role to play here, if nothing else than to point out the problems and to urge actors to act more virtuously.

However, there is no need for universal criticism or calls for the scrapping of ecolabels (cf. Zsolt 2016). Ecolabels and voluntary sustainability standards are a reflection of how, in complex systems, there is always an interest in standardization. Indeed, the interest in having such structures could very well be stated as one of the main rationales for having a legal order in society: By establishing and upholding laws, we can create a framework for individuals and communities to interact with each other in a predictable manner, promoting stability and order in our society. A legal order could thus be described as, among other things, a powerful tool of standardization, with rules guiding behavior, and courts and procedures enforcing the standards found legitimate and appropriate. In ecolabeling schemes, it is the process of certification by autonomous third parties that provides the means of securing, or even enforcing, the standardization. While the procedural mechanisms differ, the goals overlap, as in both the

ecolabel schemes, and the law, the procedures reflect an attempt to manage complexity by supplying the predictability of formal structures.⁷

In fact, the *effectiveness* inherent in the process of standardization is a large part of the explanation for the proliferation of ecolabels. Once established, ecolabels are manageable in application and use. This furthers their continued popularity, which in turn reinforces their recognizability. And, in being easily recognizable, they become even more effective as signifiers. Obviously, there are openings for abusive practices, but the use of ecolabels as condensed arguments can provide constructive aid in climate transition. Even with a traditional Aristotelian approach, reproducing conventional ideas about the amorality of rhetoric (see Chap. 4, Sect. 4.3), one could argue that ecolabels are neither evil nor good—they are mere tools, which can be used for various purposes. We would however push the argument further. Indeed, and this fully mirrors the greenwashing criticism provided as illustration above, we would argue that properly applied, *ecolabel practices can correspond to several of the virtues of green marketing.*

Most obvious is the “Use of authentic and reliable external authorities”. The use of ecolabels could be seen as an outsourcing of the argumentative work of green marketing, both for the companies and for consumers. From the corporate speaker perspective, it is the label which “does the argumentative work”, in the sense of persuasion, as a result of a cultivated audience perception of what the label signifies. From the corresponding consumer audience perspective, ecolabels aid argumentation in the sense of deliberation, by relieving consumers of the workload inherent in making independent evaluations of corporate green promises. Consumers are encouraged to “trust the label”, in the sense of seeing it as adequate proof both that the company fulfills what is necessary to be

⁷ As regards the *potential effects on trade of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS; including Ecolabels)*, UNCTAD, 2021, takes inventory of present research and discusses how VSS can be both catalysts of and barriers to international trade. On the one hand, they can provide a competitive advantage to compliant actors, facilitate market access, have demand enhancing effects, and reduce information asymmetries and transaction costs. They can also provide incentives necessary for the modernization and technological upgrades of value chains, benefiting higher production and lowering input costs. On the other hand, their expansion and increased influence can work to exclude and give a competitive disadvantage to especially small-scale producers in low-income countries, due to high compliance costs and increasing monitoring costs, which are not offset by the reduced transaction costs gained by standardization.

allowed to use the ecolabel and that those requirements are relevant. Above, in our discussion of the SBI label, we mentioned the risk of falling prey to the bandwagon fallacy when trusting an ecolabel. That criticism was related to a specific *argumentum ad populum* variant of the ecolabel-as-argument. The ecolabel in question constituted an argument, but the backing for the argument was merely that “stakeholders tend to think” that this company is relatively sustainable.

The widespread idea that arguments from authority are illegitimate might be a good starting point for philosophical skeptics, but in practical everyday life reliance upon experts and other authorities are central to how society works. Such reliance can also be rational. It is neither reasonable nor even possible to make independent decisions in a self-informed manner in all areas. Constantly disregarding expert knowledge or even the authority of conventional wisdom can indeed be unreasonable. Ecolabels will work as a sort of argument from authority, in the sense that the label is dependent on the credibility of the certifying authority, but this authority element does not mean that ecolabels are not to be trusted, or that the ecolabel-as-argument should be considered necessarily problematic. It does however mean that there is a need for balancing. If the use of ecolabels is to continue to grow (which seems a likely development), scholars and critics must balance the rhetorical study of the green marketing of certain companies (which seems like the dominant approach in contemporary rhetorical scholarship on the role of rhetoric in market economy), with the study of the rhetoric of the labels. The latter must be combined with interdisciplinary and constructively critical assessments of the certification and monitoring practices associated therewith. In our view, the virtue framework can be put to use in these types of studies. In other words, one could use the framework to investigate what rhetorical virtues (could) characterize specific ecolabels. The framework can also support the critical discussion of how green marketing practices and the communicative efforts of certain labels are intertwined.

Ecolabels can be virtuous in other ways too, beyond enabling companies to appeal to authentic and relevant external authorities. A good label, clearly visible and with clear information, could also fulfill the virtues of *precision* and *specificity*, as it signifies compliance with necessary standards. Ideally, the standards will ensure that parties are talking about the same things, as this is one of the main rationales of standard setting. They should also be highly developed, detailed, scientifically analyzed, and if possible tailored to correspond to measurable criteria so that the arguments they

entail are verifiable. If such criteria are met, arguments performed by using ecolabels can arguably be both precise and specific.

It is the third of the linguistic virtues that poses the greatest challenge, as the ecolabel format makes the trait of *transparency* difficult to achieve. Scientifically speaking, the sustainability issues involved are generally too complicated to be fully communicated through a simple label. However, it is not the point of an ecolabel to communicate the scientific issues involved in a full, honest, and straightforward way, *in and of itself*. Instead, it will communicate by referential tactics. That is, by references of the “further reading” variety, pointing to other places where one can find information useful for evaluating the promises entailed by adorning a product with an ecolabel. As the discussion this far implies, these tactics will also gain credibility from the ethos of the certifying body. In addition to referential tactics and the persuasiveness of ethos, the argumentative work of ecolabels will depend on public awareness, and indeed high public awareness is almost inherently a goal of ecolabeling schemes. (There is for instance research that hints that the “added value” of e.g. the EU Ecolabel is its potential to “close the information gap” within the market, by providing a tool for showcasing eco-innovation efforts, but that a lack of awareness of the label on the party of consumers in some sectors/countries is one of the main barriers against more widespread adoption; Iraldo and Barberio 2017.) Indeed, most ecolabels can be analyzed as self-contained brands and, as brands, their value depends on the recognizability and goodwill associated with them, or quantitatively speaking, on how often a consumer will choose a certain brand over other competitive brands.⁸

It is likely that ecolabels will continue to fulfill a central role in green marketing, and legitimacy management, as their widespread use is reasonable in light of the comfortability of their use, their fashionable character (becoming ever more trendy), and the effectiveness gained by their ever increasing familiarity to consumers. In fact, we find ourselves in something

⁸ Obviously, how to economically value a brand is a complicated issue, which has been the subject of much debate in business studies and economics, where the relevant criteria of brand value (e.g. brand recognizability, image, understanding, consideration, loyalty) are continually the subject of discussion. However, it seems clear that there needs to be some form of correlation between brand value and perception of value, in a relevant audience (e.g. consumers in a particular market segment, or more generally), and this is the simple and relatively uncontroversial point here. Further, value should not be reduced to a question of how much money to assign as the price of something.

of a virtuous circle where ecolabels potentially become more effective the more they are used. Their form means that even a quick glance can, almost subliminally, convey the message of sustainability. They work as convenient shorthands for complex substantial arguments. However, for this shorthand to be transparent, as green marketing conveying substantial sustainability information, the argumentative ecology in which they perform their work needs to contain also pedagogical performances. In terms of the classical trichotomy of *movere, docere, delectare*, speakers wishing to move must first teach, in order for the ecolabels to work as conveyors of meaningful information about what the ecolabels actually entail, as promises of sustainability.

Summing up, we can see that the position that ecolabels have gained means that they are an interesting object for green marketing virtue studies. We have already discussed the perhaps most obviously implicated virtues, i.e. on the one hand the linguistic virtues (especially transparency), and on the other the virtue of using authentic and reliable external authorities. The latter of these two ought seemingly, given how ecolabeling schemes are designed and intended, to be considered the primary virtue of ecolabeling schemes. As regards the other virtues, for reasons of space, we will settle with some brief comments on the virtues of selection and deflection, which we discuss more extensively in relation to the clothing industry in the next section.

As long as the schemes are voluntary, it is the producers who control whether or not they want to apply an ecolabel to its products. It seems obvious that choosing to apply a label is in itself a rhetorical choice, regarding both what to highlight (the traits signaled by a specific label) and what to suppress (other traits not highlighted). This raises many complicated issues, which vary greatly between different ecolabels. In fact, this very variation reflects how each label is selective in focusing on specific traits, while simultaneously deflecting other traits. A marketer will seldom only have the choice of including one particular label or not. Rather the marketer will face a choice between different labels (e.g. on the one hand the Nordic swan, and on the other the EU Ecolabel) that either compete or can be combined. As ecolabels can be interpreted as general promises of sustainability, virtue requires some level of transparency with what is actually signified, and this transparency is inextricably tied to issues of selection and deflection. The only way they can be evaluated is by taking account of the principle of situationality. The evaluation needs to center on the significance of a particular ecolabel use, in a particular industry context.

Further, the evaluation needs to heed the principle of multiple audiences. We must account for the relevant audience in that market. However, as evaluators, we should also account for a supervisory specialist audience, and consider the quality of the third-party authority constituted by the organization responsible for the certification process, as well as an external audience, for example, officials or scholars, that can critically scrutinize ecolabel usages.

In conclusion, the external authorities involved in ecolabeling schemes merit attention. The organizations administering the certifications, and monitoring the use of ecolabels, will have a very important role in securing the virtue of ecolabel practices. The organizations will for most practical purposes have both oversight and control over issues of what evidence is required for actors to be allowed to (continue to) use a label. They will work to control the public perception of the label, gaining and maintaining legitimacy for it. They will have power over the selection or deflection of what issues are raised, and what is promised by a label. As long as the schemes are voluntary, it is the producers who control whether or not they want to use an ecolabel, but the choice they are given is very much of the “take it or leave it” kind, as they will need to either buy into the whole scheme as such or abstain. Given their importance, the ecolabeling agencies, the standards used, the inner workings of specific labels, and organizations, all merit attention and are worthwhile objects of further research. Here, we have mainly wanted to point out some possible avenues of such research, which we hope that other researchers will join us in performing and which we would call for, considering that ecolabel usage will in all likelihood not only endure, but indeed develop and multiply.

9.3 CLEAN CLOTHES, CIRCULAR ECONOMY, AND THE SPEED OF FASHION

Without attempting to present a full analysis of the green marketing of any specific company, or of the industry as a whole, let us take a look at the clothing industry. We will map some common arguments made by clothing companies in their green marketing and look at some of the tensions raised by their rhetoric. As our source material, we will primarily use commercial websites, commonly providing more elaborate green marketing arguments than the catchy slogans provided in radio, television, or newspaper advertisements. Our discussion will further illustrate how the virtue

framework can be put to use. Perhaps it can also inspire more in-depth studies of certain arguments or actors within the clothing sector.

A central dilemma for clothing companies is how to negotiate public understanding of the companies' various motives. A significant part of the public seems to be of the impression that the clothing industry in general—and fast fashion in particular—is not only environmentally unsustainable, but also an arena for the exploitation of workers and eco-systems in the Global South. This trend in public opinion has led to a need for clothing companies to prove their sustainability and demonstrate their ethical practices, as a way of gaining or maintaining legitimacy (see, generally, e.g. Binet et al. 2018). Still, any idea to implement a blanket ban on new clothes would inevitably be considered both unrealistic and impractical, or perhaps just plain dumb, as clothing companies can be considered to fulfill a basic, taken-for-granted human need. Companies within the clothing sector thus have a certain *cognitive legitimacy*, and gain *pragmatic legitimacy*.⁹ Especially when they make products that are also, for whatever reason, appealing to their consumer base, people will want to accept clothing companies as legitimate.

It seems, then, that *moral legitimacy* is the real crux of the matter. From a strategic (managerial) perspective, the question arises whether companies should bring the attention of the consumer to moral issues, or if it would be more profitable just to ignore the matter, in the sense of not explicitly addressing it. As previously discussed, however, the institution of sustainability is strengthened over time, and this creates an increasing demand for moral legitimization efforts regarding sustainability issues.

In essence, ignoring the problem will not make it go away. Green marketing is an answer to this legitimacy crisis, as it addresses the call for moral legitimization. The challenge for companies within this industry is to substantiate that their organization not only strives to maximize profits, but also contributes to the common good. Against the backdrop of all the well-known problems in the clothing industry (e.g. Niinimäki et al. 2020), they must attempt to persuade consumers that consuming their products can be considered, at least relatively, sustainable.

Clothing companies employ various strategies to negotiate the tensions between profitable behavior and moral motives, and between capitalistic exploitation and sustainable living. One common strategy to strengthen moral legitimacy and mitigate the capitalistic motives of a business

⁹On different forms of legitimacy, see Chap. 3, Sect. 3.1.

enterprise is to *donate money to charities and various environmental causes*. Both the model for donations and how the amounts are settled vary. Some actors merely encourage their customers to donate by offering to “round the price up” or donate a specific amount to a particular organization if the customer checks a box while placing an online order. In such cases, the companies work as facilitators. They provide charitable organizations with more exposure and encourage others to donate, rather than donating anything themselves. Such models provide the companies with a relatively cheap way of gaining legitimacy by presenting the companies as facilitators of charity. In addition, they serve customers by providing a convenient way to make donations, which may help to ease their consciences. The latter is particularly interesting in relation to an increased awareness of the negative effects of consumption. Research suggests that people often tend to reason about moral deeds as if it were accounting, where a good deed balances a negative deed (Wolrath Söderberg and Wormbs 2022; cf. Gorissen and Weijters 2016; Sörqvist and Langeborg 2019). By offering the customers a way to donate when consuming, the companies could be seen as providing a mechanism for this form of moral accounting. However, some customers may also feel guilty, when declining the opportunity to donate, and this may negatively impact the customer relationship. Still, when such strategies are successful, they entail a symbiotic (or mutually parasitic) relationship; the organizations get donations, while the companies get to construct themselves as co-contributors to the organizations’ causes, thus borrowing legitimacy not only from the institution of charity but also from the specific organizations with which they partner.

Another interesting model is “1% for the planet” ([onepercentfortheplanet.org](https://www.onepercentfortheplanet.org)). The model is both chosen and championed by a network of businesses and individuals who pledge to donate 1% of their annual sales or individual salaries to environmental causes. The network presents itself as a movement, and by joining the movement, you can use their icon as a third-party certificate (reminiscent of the ecolabels discussed in the previous section). In presenting the model, its proponents argue that it counteracts the risk of greenwashing inherent in pledges of monetary donations without external control or benchmarks. In donating to non-profit organizations, the companies do make a real contribution. However, a cynical position in relation to this practice, as a form of sustainability work, would be that the “third-party certificate” in these cases is simply a bought token. The model provides a way of rhetorically compensating for negative

effects, without necessarily doing the work or actually changing any unsustainable practices one engages in.

Beyond donating money in exchange for goodwill, some companies position themselves morally by constructing themselves as *being a different type of organization or having a special structure of ownership*. An especially topical example is found in the new structure of ownership of the high-profile clothing company Patagonia. The company specializes in outdoor equipment and has very consciously cultivated its environmental ethos for decades, leading to it being characterized as “Deep Green” (Zint and Frederick 2001), in the sense of having a particularly strong green ethos. In line with this ethos, in 2022, its owner announced that ownership of the whole company (at the time valued at circa 3 billion USD, with an expected revenue of another 100 million USD/year) was to be transferred to a foundation dedicated to fighting climate change. The move was symbolized by the adoption of a new slogan: “Earth is now our only shareholder.” This very recent development is obviously both high profile and high stakes, and it will be interesting to see how it will play out in the years to come.

There are of course more mundane approaches. For instance, more traditional *corporate storytelling* is frequently performed in ways that emphasize the founders’ or the employees’ passion for sustainability. Often this message is accompanied by stories about how they enjoy spending time outdoors, perhaps presented with photos of them smiling while doing so, against a beautiful backdrop of perhaps a mountain range, an autumn forest, or a streaming water. Infallibly this is paired with a sort of outdoorsy, hipsteresque aesthetic, and perhaps a cute dog in someone’s lap. You get the picture. There are indeed many examples of how companies can rhetorically portray themselves as small-scale, locally-sourced, or communally-owned enterprises, in ways that can both allude to the “big business bad” trope (which finds an especially crisp expression in “Big Tobacco”, “Big Oil”, etc.) and employ the inverse trope of “small business good”, often involving more or less subtle ways of portraying a closeness, to nature, to local communities, or to each other (e.g. as “family”).

Turning to our list of green marketing virtues, the *ethics of selections and deflection* come to the fore. Both the global clothing industry and the modern-day consumption of clothing have complex and problematic aspects. A virtuous practice of green marketing must acknowledge this complexity and present a *balanced disclosure of relevant aspects* in relation to, for example, company practices, product qualities, and production

processes, for example, by taking a product's entire life cycle into account. Further, it would be virtuous to present *a balanced account of corporate responsibilities* in relation to economic, environmental, and social issues, and to address how the company handles these responsibilities.

To exemplify, we can look at Gneis, a relatively small Swedish brand and web store for children's outdoor clothes. (Without having performed any real quantitative analysis to substantiate this claim, it seems clear to us that outdoor products invite a particularly generous measure of green marketing.) Gneis' website explicitly describes four aspects of its sustainability work:

1. design and product development,
2. material,
3. production and suppliers, and
4. sales and transportation.

Allowing ourselves an initial evaluative statement, this is clearly an ambitious approach, signaling acknowledgment of the inevitable complexity of sustainability work.

Looking closer at their argument within each subcategory, we find that their arguments in relation to design do not present specific, black-and-white, binding promises. Rather, they present a sort of philosophy of priorities and choices, such as prioritizing quality in the sense of making clothes that last; prioritizing function to make clothes that are used, and choosing colors that have a timeless and gender-neutral appeal to make it easier to pass them on from one child to another. Their section on material is much more concrete and specific, and to some extent detail-oriented, mentioning certificates used for certain materials, specific chemicals not used, and other input-choices, such as avoiding unnecessary use of packaging, hangtags, and care labels (with washing advice etc.). As regards production and transport, the discussions are also rather specific, naming the countries used, the modes of transport, as well as their reasoning regarding logistical choices. No external authority for control of factories is mentioned, however, and several claims are not binding promises, or at least not clear about what the company actually binds itself to. For example, it claims to "avoid air freight *as much as possible*" (emphasis added). As previously discussed, there is a dialectic between *specific and general* which is inherent in the linguistic virtues of specificity and preciseness. The example illustrates how this dialectic is highly relevant for the analysis of

green claims. It also indicates the importance of authentic and reliable external sources and supporting evidence (virtues 9 and 10).

Gneis' main approach for substantiating their green ethos seems however to be to provide transparency as regards their reasoning and choices, as well as to substantiate that they have deep knowledge about sustainability through their attention to details. Their key virtue, the one they emphasize the most, is thus prudence, or phronesis, which is manifested by their reasoning and maneuvering in relation to issues that they admit are complicated. A critical comment could be that, as already mentioned, some statements lack specificity. Others lack backing. As a result, the company's ability to persuade depends on trust, and the website presents the small-scale vibe of the company in a way that seems designed to foster the kind of trust held in more intimate interpersonal relationships, rather than in the more transactional exchange relationships between corporations and consumers. This also seems to align with some contemporary marketing theories (cf. e.g. Bagozzi 1975; Grönroos 1994; Vargo and Lusch 2011).

An additional, but highly emphasized, aspect of Gneis' website is how it urges customers to maximize the use of each garment. This call to action is perhaps the very core of Gneis' green marketing; the company promises to work actively with sustainability in production, but most of all it promises to make clothes that last. Gneis' invites the customer to a collaboration of sorts, an "Us"-affirming alliance, creating a union where the two actors constituting the "We" are positioned as a collaborative counterforce to the morally-objectionable practices of fast fashion.

It is interesting to compare Gneis' website to that of H&M, one of the absolute giants of the global fashion industry. At the time of writing this analysis, the H&M brand website did not highlight or push any sustainability issues or sustainability work on their homepage (i.e. the first page one arrives at).¹⁰ Thus, compared to Gneis, H&M to a larger extent chooses not to highlight the aforementioned legitimacy problems of the clothing industry. They do, however, have the link "Sustainability" in their main menu, providing information for those that bother to enquire further. Following that link, one lands on a page with a highlighted section titled: "For the love of craft", claiming that "teaching women to weave can bring equality to the villages of India". This segment of the

¹⁰www.hm.com, visited 2022 Nov 11.

sustainability page is not permanent, viewed two weeks later,¹¹ it is moved down and the top segment instead highlights the topic “Dressing for the metaverse: Spectacular, out-of-this-dimension pieces for physical and virtual worlds”, a story with a completely different feel to it. Instead of appealing to the “real” or “genuine” character of handicraft in rural India, this segment (with an unclear relation to sustainability) evokes a sort of science fiction feeling and pushes the need for design and clothing in virtual reality. Below this highlighted section, H&M presents its sustainability work under a number of headings, with connected subpages. Namely, they include the following: (a) *Let’s change*, (b) *Let’s innovate*, (c) *Let’s be fair*, (d) *Let’s be for all*, (e) *Let’s be transparent*, (f) *Let’s clean up*, (g) *Let’s close the loop*, (h) *Take Care*, and (i) *Praise from others*. All of these headings, taken together, and combined with the highlighted sections, signal a broad approach to sustainability, including social justice, gender equality, and diversity as well as environmental sustainability.

In relation to the virtue framework, one could view this sustainability page as an attempt to provide a balanced account of sustainability work, but so far without clear substance. Regarding environmental sustainability, H&M emphasizes that they “like” their clothes “toxic-free” and that the trends of recycling and repairing are worth following. Note however that no substance in terms of concrete green promises is presented. Someone more cynical than the present authors might be inclined to say that the company manages to talk a lot, without saying much. The gist of the rhetoric in these headlines and their respective subpages is to avoid making promises about the present, but instead to signal that H&M is taking or will take part in the transformation of the industry and that they want to invite their consumers to be a part of that journey. Apparently, it is not time to be sustainable right now, but according to H&M it is rather “time to change”. A key ethos argument is that “change is at [their] core”. The argument attempts to turn their problematic identity, as a fast fashion company, into a virtuous quality: in being fast, they are used to change, and to not only following trends but indeed to setting them, leading the way.

While H&M does not say this explicitly, it is not that far removed from claiming to lead a sustainable change or positioning oneself as leading the climate transition. However, their green promises have a lofty nature, as well as a rather sneaky temporality, where they are regularly placed in the

¹¹ 2022 Nov 28.

future. While the sustainability rhetoric has a grandiosity to it, it lacks in both substantial content and actual commitment. This is perhaps best illustrated by quoting their promise “to ourselves”: The promise is not presented as a promise to their consumers, or stakeholders, but indeed as a promise from the company to “themselves”—which later can of course release the promisor from the promise. This makes abundantly clear that the promise has all the binding characteristics of, say, a New Year’s resolution. In their own words:

Let’s face it. While we love fashion, it has a huge impact on the environment. The industry has to change and someone has to take the lead. So, let’s make that us. Let’s see how much more efficiently we can collect and recycle unwanted clothes on a global scale. Let’s find out how little waste we can create. Let’s remove all unnecessary plastic. Let’s take away any hazardous chemicals. Let’s accelerate innovation of sustainable materials. Let’s not settle for being one of the largest buyers of organic cotton in the world; let’s make sure all our cotton is kinder to the planet. Let’s take care of our fashion favorites by repairing and remaking. Let’s close the loop on fashion. Let’s keep working for fair jobs and push the boundaries on transparency in the fashion world. Also, let’s do what we can so that future world shapers feel good about themselves and more tolerant toward others. Let’s make everyone feel included, regardless of background, gender, religion, age, abilities, sexual orientation, style or size. Let’s make fashion sustainable and sustainability fashionable. Let’s write a new promise when these boxes are ticked. Let’s change fashion.

Of course, this sub-genre of corporate rhetoric is not an odd bird or weird invention, unique to H&M. It is common corporate practice to define the organization by presenting its vision, value base, or policies in these kinds of lofty statements, and to signify how those values and principles guide the corporation’s actions and decisions. Still, in terms of green promises, and employing a judicial perspective—taking inventory of how to make green promises actually matter (cf. Mossberg 2023)—the reliance on these kinds of speech acts, tailored to be vague and therefore not binding, is problematic. While they can have effects on the expectations of the

audience, and the employees, potentially leading a company toward conforming their *walk* to their *talk* (cf. Chap. 3, Sect. 3.2), the vagueness and the constantly-postponed fulfillment of any clear-cut goals is still a problem.

In fact, the vagueness and lack of precision saturate so much of the H&M website's rhetoric that it is difficult to identify the virtuous aspects of the green marketing there performed. Looking further at the "Let's innovate" page and then clicking one's way to the "Our more sustainable materials" page, one gets the feeling of exploring a Matryoshka doll, moving from one page to the next, delving ever deeper into the stratified depths of green rhetoric of one of the world's larger fast fashion companies, in a search for specific, binding statements. It is a search that one in time starts to fret might be in vain, as in lieu of more precise, verifiable promises H&M will often proclaim things like how they are "on a journey toward only using recycled or other more sustainable materials by 2030". The factual promise regarding materials on this page is thus only to embark on some sort of adventurous travel, which may or may not reach the goal of becoming *more* sustainable eight years in the future. On a different page they discuss animal welfare, claiming that they "*aim* to only source animal-based materials from farms with good animal care, breeding and management" and that they're "*exploring* ways to replace materials like wool, leather and down with more sustainable alternatives" (emphasis added). There are indeed more precise and sometimes measurable promises to be found on the website, but it deserves to be re-emphasized that a visitor browsing through the pages, going ever deeper down the rabbit hole, will mostly be met with lofty slogans and grandiose imagery, primarily signaling only that H&M—and by extension their consumers—are, in an under-specified way, part of an important transformation.

As mentioned, more precise statements can be found, in particular when surfing to the page presenting the *sustainability report* of the H&M Group. One such statement that stands out is that they claim to have "tripled" the share of recycled materials used in their garments, from 5.8% to 17.9% in a year (confirmed in H&M's Annual & Sustainability Report 2021). To be clear, in this book, we do not make any qualitative inquiry into the question of whether or not H&M is a relatively sustainable company within the clothing industry. We only use the company as an example, focusing on its marketing efforts as a matter of rhetorical ontology, and perhaps most of all to illustrate that having a lot of pages and a lot of text and images on sustainability does not in itself constitute an example

of virtuous green marketing or of transparency. Indeed, this reaffirms the classical wisdom that for all but aesthetic purposes, brevity with substance will always beat verbosity without. In fact, the vagueness and, the we-will-be-better-tomorrow approach, spread out on a lot of pages on the website, works *against transparency*, by effectively hiding the substance in the sheer amount of information. (Perhaps it is far-fetched, or just a reflection of pop-cultural preferences, but isn't it kind of like when, in lawyer shows on TV, the Big Corp defendant bad guy will try to drown the protagonist plaintiff small firm attorneys by dumping an endless number of document boxes in their offices? Albeit with the possible difference that, typical to the genre, there will always be some gem of information hidden in those records.)

An interesting aspect, that becomes clear when looking at the sustainability rhetoric of H&M and comparing it to companies within the outdoor clothing industry with a high profile in terms of green marketing, is that H&M does not highlight quality. The company does not say that their clothes are physically durable or that they have timeless designs allowing for the transcendence of trends. Instead, the key term in their marketing is *circularity*. Now, of course, circularity is generally hailed as a key aspect of building a sustainable society and thus bears a measure of legitimacy. However, circularity is also a way of approaching sustainability challenges that does not necessitate questioning the fundamental business idea of companies like H&M, and indeed the very idea of fast fashion.

The problematic aspect of this is illustrated by H&M touting the “tripled” use of recycled material in their garments. Of course, the increase from 5.8 to 17.9% is significant. It is however far from a circular business model. And if you compare keeping a fast fashion consumption pattern, but with partially recycled material, to the benefits of a slow fashion business model with significantly lower consumption of clothes that last, which may well also include recycled materials, the framing of fast fashion as circular inevitably comes out as problematic. A preliminary judgment would be that H&M’s argument does not, despite the first impression provided by the many sections of the website, fulfill the virtue of a balanced account of relevant aspects. In selecting a focus on circularity, they deflect the inherent problems of fast fashion. In fact, their circularity goals could be seen as based on a misleading comparison, where their relative sustainability is the result of a comparison only with their own old self, or with other fast fashion companies that do not strive to “change”. This

suggests a marketing vice-problematic of the “best in class” or “lesser of two evils” variety.

When we analyze their green marketing to capture their green ethos, we find that it is somewhat Janus-Faced. On the one hand, the rhetoric of H&M has clear similarities to certain aspects of the green rhetoric of oil companies. They emphasize lofty promises and focus more on being in movement toward sustainability, to be reached somewhere in a more-or-less distant future, than on any present conditions. On the other hand, one cannot dismiss aims such as to use 30% recycled material by 2025 as null; they are indeed factual, quantifiable, and at least in principle verifiable pledges. What is more, an economic argument could be made that comparing exclusive outdoor clothing companies and H&M is unfair. The high consumer price of the clothes of certain brands with a high profile regarding sustainability management risks making sustainable consumption a matter only for people with high income—a privilege for the rich. Arguably, sustainability efforts on cheap clothes should therefore be supported, despite not reaching the same high bar as the efforts of companies with a customer base that has more purchasing power. Further, the very real effects of the sustainability work of large multinational companies should not be neglected. While we can often, and should almost always, ask for more,¹² the sheer size of their operations can mean that the sum total effects of even small incremental increases in their sustainability efforts can still be considerable. Even small increases in the percentage of renewable material in the global clothing industry can be considered as steps in a more sustainable direction, and arguably, the goal will likely be reached in a series of consecutive steps, rather than in one great leap. However, we need to acknowledge that all consumption of new clothes has an impact on the environment. The incremental increases should thus be placed in the “becoming less bad” category, and regardless of ways of production, it is difficult to see how the achievement of such sustainability goals can ever be combined with growth in the textile industry as a whole.

To cut to the chase, as regards our discussion of H&M in relation to the green marketing virtues framework, we hope to have shown that this

¹²While finalizing this chapter in November 2022, we are provided with an illustration of the risks that are inherent in believing in non-binding and lofty promises of big corporations, as H&M once again makes it to the headlines in Sweden. This time with an investigative news report revealing how water from an H&M factory in Bangladesh is polluting the surrounding environment.

framework can be applied also to companies with a somewhat problematic use of green marketing, as well as a somewhat problematic business model. In doing so, we do to some extent repeat the patterns of greenwashing criticism. The repetition is however not complete, since the norm, the ideal, and the virtues highlighted by the framework, and thereby the constructive suggestions, are always present in the arguments made.

As mentioned, many of the clothing companies that prioritize green aspects in their marketing sell clothing fit for outdoor activities, or market their clothes as produced for wildlife experiences. The marketing efforts of these companies are interesting in many ways, perhaps especially in terms of discussing their *target audience*, as well as their *constituted audience*. It seems clear that their primary target audiences are consumers interested in nature and outdoor activities. That they also highlight sustainability and environmental responsibility could thereby be read as a way of adhering to the supposed values of this target audience. In describing the target audience as consisting of people interested in outdoor activities in the wild we must however avoid interpreting this too literally. Just as a 4×4 Jeep-style car can be sold to suburban families through a commercial depicting off-road driving, one can sell boots and winter jackets to an urban consumer with ads depicting mountain hiking. Still, there is something interesting in the fact that green marketing of clothing seems to correlate with an appeal to a positive evaluation of hiking, wildlife experiences, and nature-oriented outdoor activities in general. On the one hand, this exemplifies how green marketing can utilize the values of certain target groups to sell more sustainable clothing. On the other hand, it could be considered problematic if sustainable consumption becomes (or remains) a niche market. To support climate transition, for instance, we need a shift toward more sustainable consumption also in very urban market segments, indeed in all segments. Marketing aimed at people who love nature might perhaps include a risk of leading to dissociation, at least if green marketing becomes a sort of identity marketing, appealing to certain groups while alienating others. On the other hand, one could argue that an appreciative attitude toward nature is something of an icebreaker for sustainability concerns. If one accepts this premise, then the fact that corporations in their marketing promote a positive evaluation of nature can also function as a form of indirect climate transition rhetoric that highlights what we as a society—and as individuals in that society—should value.

Returning to Patagonia, we can see that the platform of being an outdoor clothing company can also be used to ask more general questions

regarding consumption. We do, for example, have their much discussed “Don’t buy this jacket” ad, signaling an awareness of the fact that they, despite their ambitious efforts as regards sustainability, cannot erase the fact that consumption has a negative environmental impact. That ad, as well as the conflicting goals evident in H&M’s marketing, both illustrate that the clothing industry has fundamental questions that it needs to address, questions regarding production, business models, and—if you listen to us—rhetoric.

Despite this complexity, the selling of clothes as consumer products is at least in principle relatively straightforward as an environmental challenge. Governments regulate working conditions, chemicals, and materials used, etc., while the companies producing the products adhere to these rules, or not, perhaps adding their own criteria. Then, in light of all this, and taking account of factors important to them, consumers can buy the products, or elect not to, perhaps choosing something else or indeed wholly abstaining.

Other arenas provide different challenges in terms of both the ecology of green promises, and the transparency of sustainability. Below we will further exemplify and highlight some challenges by looking at green marketing within the energy sector.

9.4 BALANCED CORPORATE RHETORIC: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES IN MARKETING ENERGY

Energy production and consumption has a huge impact on the climate and corporate green promises regarding the sustainability of energy are commonplace in energy producers’ marketing. However, energy is a prerequisite for most domains of production and consumption, and green promises about energy are often made not only by energy producers, but also by energy consumers. Producers of goods, for instance, often mention their use of energy from renewable sources as an argument in marketing their products as sustainable. (“Our bread is baked using wind power!”) Energy is thus an important issue for concrete climate transition work and for corporate marketing relating to it. In that sense, energy is similar to, for example, transportation and logistics, or social responsibility for workers, in that it is an integrated dimension of other markets. Energy also has a pervasive effect on those markets in a way that influences their respective discourses. Beyond the importance of energy for other

commercial sectors, the energy market is interesting in its own right. It has unique characteristics, relating to the products, the regulatory framework, and the norms of discourse, and the latter is in turn affected by the products and regulations.

In this section, we want to explore the virtue perspective further by using energy marketing as a frame of reference. Of particular interest are the *ethics of selection and deflection*, as well as the corresponding virtues of balanced disclosure of relevant aspects (e.g. as relating to product/company/process), and balanced disclosure of economic, environmental, social, and ethical responsibility (see Chap. 6, Sect. 6.2). The idea is not to go into specifics concerning how to make various types of green promises relating to certain technological solutions, or how to best phrase such promises.¹³ Instead, we use the energy market as an example and a resource for discussing the challenges and possibilities relating to being balanced in matters that are highly complex. In doing so, we want to highlight some possibly fruitful connections between on the one hand the challenges of green marketing within the energy sector and on the other contemporary research on environmental communication and climate transition rhetoric.

While arguably all areas of global production and consumption are complex, due to the global scale and their many interconnected parts, the energy market, and thus energy marketing, is different in many ways from more typical marketing of consumer goods, such as clothing. These differences present particular challenges.

First, products such as electricity, gas, oil, or indeed heat do not present themselves as distinct *objects*. What you consume is not an individual pair of slim-fit jeans made in a specific factory in Bangladesh. Rather, it is a fungible quantity of a certain product, or indeed only a measure of a continuous flow, which can only be distinguished with more or less advanced technical aids. These products are assigned certain rather abstract qualities and will often be tradable only as something allocated from the global marketplace, or allotted from a larger systemic pool. The conceptualization of this as a product is in a sense metaphorical. The energy market is thus different in terms of both how commodification works and how the products function.

Second, most products on the energy market are not only, or perhaps even primarily, consumer products. Energy is fundamental to all aspects of

¹³While such detailed, more applied studies would no doubt be a worthwhile activity, this book is not the right place to do it.

society, and a necessity for us, as a species, in order to do any kind of work. Easily transportable energy sources such as oil, coal, and gas have indeed been instrumental in enabling and shaping industrialization as well as the broader global economy (Malm 2016). Commercial actors, public actors, and private individuals all require energy to perform even basic functions. This is one of the reasons why the energy market is high up on the international political agenda, and why marketing and demand function differently in the energy sector. The ongoing “energy crisis” resulting from the war in Ukraine illustrates how a shortage of energy, or even the risk of energy shortage, can have profound effects on society and on the workings of the market.

Third, the relative sustainability of different energy consumption and production options is often complex. It is regularly subject to intense debate. Partly, this is due to the interconnected nature of different systems, as well the various temporalities at play regarding the impacts of climate change (e.g. in terms of what is desirable in the short term vs. necessary in the long run). In addition, when studying electricity we can see that various forms of production, storage, and consumption not only have a climate footprint, but also impact the functioning of the electricity system and market in different ways. The effects on the electricity system include security, quality, and balance (between production and demand at any given time and location). The topic of sustainable electricity production and consumption is thus both technically and discursively complex.

As the complexities are interconnected, and linked with various conflicting interests, determining the best energy choices is rarely a straightforward task. Especially as the most sustainable form of energy production is not necessarily to be found in one single technology, but could instead be a specific combination of different forms of production, depending on the geography, meteorology, and other factors. Hence—and this is a key point—green marketing on this market constitutes an arena particularly well suited for thoughtful deliberative practices, where actors show prudence in the weighing of alternatives.

The complexity and the challenges of different energy choices can be illustrated by the debates on the *EU Taxonomy*, a classification system of “environmentally sustainable economic activities”, part of the EU financial regulatory framework. The taxonomy is primarily intended to guide financial decision making toward a more sustainable order. The taxonomy has been a major subject of debate. It has sparked discussions regarding whether natural gas, as a fossil fuel, or nuclear power, with its particular

environmental challenges, should reasonably be considered sustainable (e.g. Schreiber et al. 2020; Spinaci 2020; Zachmann 2020). These issues are highly contested, but our point here is rather simple: Even if a certain form of energy production, analyzed separately, would, in some respects, be clearly better than another form of energy production, also analyzed separately, one should avoid such atomism. Instead, the production forms should be evaluated as part of a highly complex system of interconnected parts. Further, this complex system will inevitably require balancing both in technical and in economic terms, as well as in terms of the social dynamics governing their respective legitimacy. Such balancing must inevitably be multifaceted and consider multiple aspects. These include the potential for scaling, the qualities of the energy produced,¹⁴ and the corresponding possibilities or challenges in terms of planability, stability, security, and access to fuel. It is also necessary to consider initial investment costs, as well as the costs and complexity, or simplicity, of continued production. In light of this, critique against the EU taxonomy based on the fact that it takes political considerations and national interests into account seems to be simultaneously correct and misleading. Critics are correct, in that certain choices may be unfortunate in relation to the urgent timeline for climate transition, but having the democratic legitimacy of the framework in mind is not necessarily problematic. In fact, it is rather the opposite. That political considerations are part of the EU taxonomy mirrors that choices relating to energy production are not purely scientific questions but also inherently political issues. The governing structures of the system of energy production are inherently part of the *polis*. Therefore, the discourse on energy should be considered an arena for the exercise of *prudence*.

The EU Taxonomy does not just illustrate the complexity of deciding what are sustainable energy sources. It also illustrates one way of handling such complexities, namely by adopting adaptive standards. It is worth noting that taxonomies, or standards, can be provided not only by the government, but also by civil society or collaborative business organizations

¹⁴Topics of energy, power, and electricity quality are beyond the scope of this book. Here, we intentionally use the term “qualities of energy” in an abstract and scientifically unorthodox sense to refer to a vast range of differences, including the different qualities of coal, oil, and natural gas, as well as differences between various sub-variants of liquid biofuels, and qualities relating to how electricity functions in power grid. Beyond climate impact, these aspects include dimensions of transportability, storability, convertibility, and range of usability.

(as indeed is illustrated by e.g. the development of voluntary sustainability standards, discussed in Sect. 9.1).

A key dimension of rhetorical prudence (discussed in Chap. 6, Sect. 6.1, and Chap. 8, Sect. 8.2) in complex and politically infused matters concerns how the rhetoric, as expressed reasoning, relates to the *ethics of selection and deflection*. In fact, all green marketing involves choices about which aspects to highlight—and which to deflect. These choices provide various framings, and as such, they are inherently rhetorical. They shape not only how a certain problem is described, who has the responsibility to address it, and how this can or should be done, but also whether or not something is at all seen as a problem or an issue (e.g. Entman 1993; Kuypers 2010). In fact, as a matter of rhetorical criticism, even silence involves framing, and can be considered an especially flagrant way of deflection (Glenn 2004).

A simplistically “traditional” understanding of strategic communication could be that a company should highlight “all that is beneficial for them” and suppress all that is not. Such a recommendation suggests a rather cynical approach to “efficiency” in communication. It reflects an instrumentalist view, where ethics are bracketed, and actions evaluated merely in terms of their consequences for a corporate bottom line without taking account of the practices in and of themselves. In our view, such instrumentalism is neither virtuous nor ethically neutral, and in this book, we propose a different viewpoint.

In light of the challenges of green promises in the energy sector, we can now add another normative product of the virtue framework. Namely, that the complexity of a system should influence the evaluation of rhetoric treating matters relating to that system. Acknowledging complexity, and navigating it explicitly, can in itself be a rhetorical virtue and should be assessed as such. In fact, the virtues of *being balanced* (both as relating to product/company/process, and in terms of economic, environmental, social, and ethical responsibility), and of making *fair and relevant comparisons*, both exemplify how handling complexity is part of virtuous rhetoric. The performance of these virtues will inevitably be influenced by the complexity of the context, which in turn renders the appraisal of them into a qualitative task.

Our point, on the virtue of being balanced and fair, could be illustrated negatively, by looking at the opposite of what we propose. Unbalanced rhetoric and unfair comparisons are both widespread in the public debate on energy and present in marketing guided by a traditional capitalist logic.

When faced with the challenge of creating a sustainable energy system, many politicians and participants in the public debate resort to arguing for or against a specific energy source, contrasting it to others on selective grounds. The particular position varies, but much of the political debate is characterized by polarization and demonstrative rhetoric. At times, it is almost as if they were arguing over which is the best hockey team, rather than participating in an open-ended, intellectually honest deliberation over the relative merits of different energy sources—and how different ways of production are best combined to form an optimal energy mix in relation to certain values.

Interestingly, although perhaps less surprising, corporate rhetoric from niche energy producers, and green marketing of energy aimed at consumers, often follow a similar logic. Using demonstrative rhetoric, they defend or promote one type of product, contrasting it to others in selective ways. While this may be logical in terms of commercial competition, it seems suboptimal in terms of facilitating a sustainable energy transition. To be virtuous, in the present prudential sense, such rhetoric should acknowledge the systemic aspect of energy production and avoid employing overly atomistic arguments. Strategies for doing this include anchoring the rhetoric in a larger framework, such as national or international goals (cf. Rönnelid 2023), avoiding posturing, and being open about the complexity of the issues at hand (cf. e.g. Killingsworth and Palmer 1992).

As we envision how corporate green promises in general, and green marketing in particular, can facilitate transition, the question of how they can handle complexity rhetorically needs to be taken into account. Thus far, we have adopted a rather critical viewpoint of the current state of affairs. There are, however, more balanced accounts to be found—both in the public conversation and in the discourses of the private sector. As we attempt to explore a constructive take on corporate rhetoric, such examples deserve attention.

We will now devote some attention to a Swedish private sector podcast, *EnergiStrategiPodden* (The Energy Strategy Podcast). The podcast is used here as a concrete example of much more general themes and as an illustration of how the private sector can provide an arena for prudence, which can contribute to fostering a positive social dynamic. Diving into the content, we could first note that in the introduction to the episodes, the host presents himself to the listeners as the one “sharing their interest in the energy system and its various strategic challenges”. It is not emphasized in the show, but the host is also founder and former CEO of the consulting

company behind the podcast. In the various episodes, invited guests from the energy sector are interviewed about energy strategies, business operations, their products, and what problems and possibilities they see concerning different aspects of the energy system. Compared with the general public debate, the show provides a more balanced account of the challenges of the ongoing energy transition. This is mainly due to the show's diversity of participants, the relatively nuanced and pedagogical style of discussion, the explorative lines of questioning, and the tendency to allow in-depth discussions.

Interestingly, the podcast and many of the companies interviewed could also be said to illustrate the potentially constructive relationship between self-interest and the public good that we discussed in Chap. 5. Several actors do in fact frame themselves as enablers of a sustainable transition and thus as good. Their commercial interests are not denied, but participants in the podcast often highlight how their business models change or develop to serve climate transition, for instance by the development of new products, streamlining, or cultivation of new market opportunities. Thus, the market economy is perpetually present in the background, and the possibility of profit is seen as an enabler of transition, which in itself is generally discussed in terms of an unquestionable necessity.

One episode (#156), published in December 2022, illustrates how the podcast both navigates complexity and frames profit as a necessary catalyst for climate transition. In the episode, a representative of state-owned *Vattenfall*, one of Sweden's largest energy companies, is interviewed about the recently reawakened interest in large-scale development of nuclear power in the Swedish energy system. The episode focuses on the complexity of building new nuclear power plants and how much needs to be done in order to create conditions where it is even possible, not to mention economically feasible, to do so. This line of reasoning provides a sharp contrast to accounts in the public debate (especially in comparison to the campaign rhetoric that permeated the 2022 election). The discussion refrains from deflecting the major challenges of a renewed nuclear power program in Sweden. It thus seems to represent a more balanced perspective, compared to other accounts that without serious inquiry criticize any nuclear investment as being too costly, dangerous, or narrow-minded. It also seems more balanced than the opposite accounts, which take as self-evident that large-scale development of nuclear power is the one and only way forward. In our view, the balanced perspective is not one that assumes that all energy sources should continue to be part of the mix, but one

which considers all energy sources on their respective merits, including systemic effects. The representative of Vattenfall is not primarily involved in pro-et-contra argumentation, but focuses on describing the complexity in a nuanced way. The episode provides a description of what needs to be done to make new nuclear power ventures practically and economically feasible.¹⁵

While several episodes are thus pedagogical in nature, and seemingly devoted to furthering the listeners' understanding of the complexities inherent in climate transition, there are also aspects of framing that are no doubt problematic. For example, in the Vattenfall episode, the imprecise slogan of becoming fossil free within one generation is mentioned.¹⁶ What is more, as the theme of the episode is nuclear energy, Vattenfall is afforded the opportunity to project a highly positive image of themselves as prudent and reasonable in relation to a hotly debated issue, while the representative receives no critical questions about other aspects of his employer's operations.

¹⁵ A problem discussed at length is how political fickleness and changing opinions discourage taking the risks involved with developing not only new nuclear power plants, but also the infrastructure needed for them to operate, including everything from roads, and access to coolant water, to education of qualified personnel, and administrative systems. The projects are inevitably big, requiring secure financing for the large investments needed. The logistics and supply chains will need to develop, as many highly specialized parts and equipment will be needed, and there are currently few who can provide them. Again, fickleness does not encourage investments (neither economical nor personal). Further—according to the interviewee—we need to reinforce and strengthen the competence in administrative authorities, the courts, and permit providers. The interviewee highlights that Sweden has actually *never* tried permits for nuclear power, as we have not built reactors in so long, that the regulatory framework has fundamentally changed, and the previous developments were not market initiatives, but had their basis directly in decisions by the legislative body (the *Riksdag*).

¹⁶ It seems to us that many of the concrete green promises made in the marketing of energy companies will tend to be vague. As mentioned, the state-owned company Vattenfall, has had a long-running campaign where they use adverts with the message “Fossil free within a generation”. This is a typical type of green promise in the negative sense: boastful of an ambitious attempt while at the same time non-committing, as it is both vague what the company actually commits to, and to whom the commitment is actually made—not to mention that it is unlikely that anyone will, or will be able to, hold the company accountable after the stipulated time (which is how long, exactly?). Here, it would be more virtuous to be more precise with the contents of the pledge, and to provide a more precise timeline. In this sense, the tactic used by several car producers, stating that, by 2035, they will sell zero fossil fueled cars, is a more virtuous example. So is the “Fit for 55” part of the EU Green Deal legislative overhaul, as it is clearly stated in numerical terms what the goal is: To reduce emissions by at least 55% by 2030.

The underlying bias that often lurks in these episodes finds another example in episode #146, where the Swedish fuel company *Preem* is interviewed about their sustainability work and climate-transition targets.¹⁷ The representatives of Preem highlight that working at Preem is a way of working for climate transition and underscore their future-oriented goals of becoming climate neutral, as well as their work with “ramping up” their production of biofuels and reducing the fossil-carbon emission from their refining processes. This description constitutes a highly selective framing of their climate impact. The host, however, questions the representatives from Preem about the total climate impact of the company’s fuel production. He encourages them to expand on their climate footprint, to present a more comprehensive view of the CO₂ emissions from different stages of the petroleum value chain, and to clarify what percentage of Preem’s fuel production is actually made up of biofuels. Now, there is some obvious strategic maneuvering at play. The guests emphasize that Preem does not have its own reserves or oil wells. It does not operate “upstream” in the petroleum value chain. They also emphasize how the emissions from Preem’s refineries are relatively small, compared to the emissions from the upstream processes of the petroleum industry, not to mention the emissions from end consumers using the products. Still, the in sum massive emissions, as well as the significant emissions of the refinery processes, are explicitly highlighted in the episode. It also highlights that renewable fuels

¹⁷The participant bias is perhaps more apparent in earlier episodes, than in later ones. One possible example is found in episode #11, where a representative of the energy/heating company Stockholm Exergi is allowed to speak at length and in highly positive notes about the operations of the company and how they support transition. Throughout, the host encourages the representative to continue with friendly questions, to a large extent (albeit not completely) refraining from more critical questions. The “pedagogical” presentation is very much framed in a way which highlights positive aspects of the company and its work, and the representative gets the opportunity to criticize parts of the legislative framework without much question, even though his criticisms seem partisan and based in a selective disclosure of relevant aspects. Granted, the podcast aims to be “politically neutral” and neutral in terms of values and to be more about presenting different ways of thinking about energy strategies, than about performing hostile interrogations of their guests. However, it seems easy to question the political neutrality of providing a platform for partisan views, without critically discussing the views presented, and as it is so easy to question, the lack of critique in some episodes will likely hurt the credibility of the show. In addition, it is worth noting that for a knowledgeable audience an argument that faces critical questions can be more persuasive, as the proponent of a certain view gets the chance to reply to potential objections from the audience (*refutatio*).

are only a relatively small part of their business (the interview was aired in November 2022).

Preem's main strategy of green marketing in the episode is two pronged. First, to emphasize how it is *different* from other petroleum companies, a fact for which anecdotal evidence is repeatedly supplied, by the representatives talking about how, at sector conferences, other companies react to how Preem is an odd company. Second, the representatives emphasize how the company is *future oriented*, in a way vaguely reminiscent of H&M's strategy (see Sect. 9.3). They talk about how Preem is moving toward transition (increasing the percentage of renewables in the mix, etc.). A possible difference, as compared to H&M, is that Preem, through its representatives, is more effective in portraying itself as already in movement toward the future foreseen and as having goals that are more fundamental to the company's transition to a more sustainable business model. H&M promises to do more in the future, thus managing to simultaneously promise and postpone action and real change. Preem, however, better manages to frame themselves as *already* effectively engaged in an irrevocable process of transitioning.

Examining *EnergiStrategiPodden* a bit closer, we can see that it not only serves as a platform for green marketing of its guests. The podcast also serves as a marketing tool for the company behind the podcast, Sigholm Tech. It specializes in consulting services in strategy, business development, and technical challenges relating to the energy industry. The producing company is rarely given much attention in the episodes. This can give the impression of an independent journalistic product. Indeed, several of the podcast providers locate it in the "Education" section, and in one "reflective episode, looking at what they've done and discussing what is to come" (#30), the host and a "guest" from within the company discuss their ambition to be neutral in terms of politics and values. Still, in relation to those who do note the organization behind the show, or perhaps find the podcast through that company's website, it will definitely function as marketing. Every time the host asks a question that is either constructive, or projects an image of being knowledgeable, this will strengthen not only his own ethos, but also that of the company (which also happens to bear the host's surname as its company name).

It is of course not a novel notion that a podcast can be used for marketing purposes, as indeed many podcasts are funded by ads or various "commercial co-operations". The marketing can however be more or less apparent. Another Swedish podcast about energy illustrates this, namely,

the podcast *Kraftsamtal* (Power talks), which is provided by Hitachi Energy, a Swedish subsidiary of the multinational conglomerate selling energy technology solutions. In *Kraftsamtal*, the episodes typically include both an external guest and an in-house guest from Hitachi. The performance of a marketing function is more blatant, as the in-house guest will often express positive views about the products and services provided by the parent company. In *EnergiStrategiPodden*, the framing of the podcast is less easily categorized as product marketing. The format is in no way brazenly used to promote individual services or even the company behind it. Moreover, it does seem to have an independent journalistic and educational purpose, in addition to any self-serving purposes. Still, it is noteworthy that several of the companies whose representatives are interviewed in the podcast, including Vattenfall and Stockholm Exergi (another major actor in the Swedish energy sector), are also listed as clients on the producing company's website. This fact is not mentioned in the podcast episodes, but it is difficult not to factor in when assessing the podcast's overall credibility.¹⁸ Interestingly, the format can be used not only for marketing purposes relating to a third-party audience, that is, the listeners. It can also be used as a means of developing the relationship between the parties participating in the conversation.

While the guests seem mostly to be business actors, the podcast has featured politicians, researchers, and experts, as well as representatives from different organizations and interest groups, and officials from government agencies and authorities. Again, this diversity supports the idea that the podcast provides an arena for combining prudence and green marketing. Still, improvements could be made concerning transparency as regards commercial relationships between the host company and guest organizations. We must also note that this particular podcast is, of course, a niche product, aimed at people in the business or with a particular in-depth interest in energy discussions. Thus, it cannot be seen as providing a template for how green marketing within the energy sector should be carried out in general. Nevertheless, the example maintains its relevance.

¹⁸ At the time of writing, there are six seasons and about 160 episodes. Vattenfall is featured in episodes #19, 56, 61, 66, 98, 113, 147, and 156. Stockholm Exergi, another of Sweden's large energy companies, is featured in episodes #148 and 11. Sigholm Tech lists only a "Some of our customers" on their website. Out of 22 companies listed, 10 seem to have been on the podcast. Besides Vattenfall and Stockholm Exergi, the podcast has also featured the clients Värmevärden (#1, 78), Mälarenenergi (#2), Hedemora energi (#8), Bodens energi (#50), Karlstad energi (#6), Riksbyggen (#13, 110), Sinfra (#54, 102), and EON (#123).

In the last episode of 2022 (#158), the host announced that the podcast had 130,000 listenings during the year, which is a significant number, considering it is a rather technical and detail-oriented Swedish-language podcast. Also, the concept of marketing—not least within the energy sector—should not be reduced to short TV ads, radio slogans, or billboards, pitching individual products to end consumers. To get a more purposive concept of marketing, it must be conceptualized wider and allowed to include more media, more addressees, and more inconspicuous tactics than the paradigmatic case of “Buy this thing!” Subtle relationship-building strategies can be at least as important (as has indeed also been widely recognized in the field of marketing studies for decades, e.g. Bagozzi 1975; Grönroos 1994; Vargo and Lusch 2011). When it comes to the energy market, channels with more in-depth treatments can potentially have a considerable impact on key transition stakeholders, that is, actors capable of substantially contributing to climate transition.

Moving on from these podcast examples, it is worth reiterating that while the list of individual virtues outlined in Chap. 6 can be useful in examining energy marketing, it is also crucial to understand how companies frame the issues of energy-system transition and climate change on a societal level. Such studies of corporate framing can provide insight into how marketing can aid or hinder progress toward a sustainable energy system and combating climate change. Therefore, our discussion on framing, which includes selection and deflection, should be broadened to encompass not only product framing but also the construction of corporate ethos and larger societal narratives. This broader approach lets us explore fruitful links to rhetorical research on effective environmental communication and climate transition rhetoric.

Qualitative research on corporate rhetoric within the energy sector often seems to thematize how the rhetoric of certain companies or industries provide a problematic framing of society, for example, by using frames that downplay the risks of climate change, emphasize the risk of a societal climate transition, avoid accountability, or allocate responsibility to other actors or countries. As discussed in Chap. 6, Sect. 6.3, Scanlan (2017) has, for example, demonstrated how petroleum companies argue for the societal benefits, or even necessity, of continuing with their controversial fracking method of oil extraction, while Smerecnik and Renegar (2010) have shown the problematic framing of climate transition used in a British Petroleum marketing campaign. We would like to propose that this type of research is continued, but with a slight shift, from the dominance of

criticism, to include the objective of finding virtuous examples and constructive argumentative maneuvers.

The adoption of such a perspective in qualitative rhetorical research involves more than a modification of research questions and study materials—emphasizing a constructive approach constitutes a change of scholarly logic. Asking questions about how we can envision a virtuous framing of society and its challenges also provides openings for a fruitful dialogue with environmental communication research and rhetorical climate transition research. There are salient connections to these fields. We have private businesses whose business models are intertwined with energy transition. Thus, their corporate communication practice intertwines the end goals of marketing and climate transition rhetoric. Comparative studies taking account of work from different fields seems a particularly fruitful avenue of inquiry. By singling out different ways of facilitating transition and their respective impacts, research can help provide a more developed theoretical framework for regulatory intervention. An example is provided in Wüstenhagen and Bilharz's (2004) research. They have studied the relative effects of on the one hand public policy and on the other consumer demand as facilitators of energy transition. Their research suggests the need for both. Another area that deserves attention is the scholarly debate on the relation between rhetoric, convictions, knowledge, and action as regards climate transition. A key question in this field, highly relevant for green marketing studies, is how rhetoric can guide praxis by forming values and by encouraging certain behavior.

Let's allow ourselves a short detour into some fundamental questions of this exciting subfield of rhetoric and communication studies. We can then note that one way to tackle the challenge of climate transition, as a matter of communication, has been to consider it an *information deficit problem*. Indeed, climate transition rhetoric, in the sense of a scholarly discipline and societal practice aiming to facilitate sustainable transition, has frequently been discussed in terms of solving or at least addressing an information deficit. Researchers have been posing the question of how best to *inform* consumers about the facts of climate change and the benefits of investing in, for example, more effective energy solutions.

However, information alone does not seem to suffice. Even as public awareness of the problems of climate change heightens, inertia seems to persist. Several studies point to the gap between knowledge and action, and there are studies critical of the possibilities of bringing about behavioral change by merely informing people on matters related to climate

change (on the “information deficit model”, and the critique of it, see Suldoovsky 2017). Hence, scholars and practitioners interested in how green marketing of energy can facilitate transition should not take for granted that merely informing the public about the complex matters involved will be enough to encourage behavioral change.

On the other hand, we should not fall into the opposite trap either, dismissing the value of knowledge, overemphasizing the problematic nature of our social being, and resorting to cynical techniques of manipulation (“nudging” being one of the possibly less controversial examples, e.g. Lehner et al. 2016). In exploring the possible characteristics of virtuous energy marketing, we must instead acknowledge that just as the information deficit model has its deficiencies, so do models that ignore the role of knowledge and substantial arguments. While humans might not be rational in the sense of the enlightenment’s liberal humanist ideal, nor are we incapable of making responsible choices when presented with information that invites action.

In moving forward, we need to acknowledge that while information and knowledge is not enough, it is important. When evaluating the role of knowledge, we need to factor in the importance of emotions, social factors, and psychological aspects, to construct satisfactory rhetorical “models”. Also, the importance of knowledge cannot be reduced to a binary question, answered plainly in the affirmative or negative. Research has shown that when evaluating the effects of knowledge on behavior we must consider the *type of knowledge* involved. General knowledge about climate change may not induce change, but certain specific types and objects of knowledge might be catalysts for change. For example, one study has indicated that knowledge about the causes and consequences of climate change can be an effective catalyst of behavioral adjustment while knowledge about the physical characteristics of the climate change process (such as the different roles of CO₂ and methane) is not. Increased information might even be counterproductive, especially if the communications fail to adhere to the values of the target audience (Shi et al. 2016). Another study has shown how many communicative efforts relating to climate transition fail to provide a sense of scale in terms of what choices matter the most. They thereby fail to guide the audience toward changes that have the most impact (Wynes and Nicholas 2017; Wynes 2019). In a third study, researchers focused on people who have actually changed their lifestyles. This study emphasizes the importance of increased knowledge, but also that there is a qualitative and very personal dimension to this process

of increased knowledge, often narrated as an emotional process where knowledge is transformed into *insight*, which is a more potent driver of change (Wormbs and Wolrath Söderberg 2021). Thus, certain types of knowledge function more constructively in relation to climate transition than others and we need to be mindful that emotions and cultural values are intrinsic to decisions (indeed, this is often taken as a premise, in the growing field of climate psychology, see e.g. Hoggett 2019; Hollway et al. 2022).

All in all, it is important to *provide a space for prudence*. We should avoid resorting to the aforementioned kind of demonstrative argumentation that follows from the reductionist path of praise-and-blame rhetoric. Instead, we should acknowledge the complex, composite, perhaps even convoluted, nature of the issues involved. We should put all cards on the table and deliberate in good faith. Perhaps it sounds over-the-top idealistic to hope that large energy companies governed by a profit motive (as is indeed presumed by most codes of corporate legislation), often with one foot in the fossil industry, should adhere to high-minded ideals of a partly altruistic nature. However, we can already see how forms of *climate capitalism* are being envisioned, realized, and further developed. Such a development can be facilitated by policy changes and indeed supported by the ever more solidified institution of climate change, as a basis for legitimation efforts. While there are no doubt fundamental challenges in combining sustainability with traditional capitalist structures, the idea of climate capitalism is not necessarily a contradiction in terms.¹⁹ In fact, we argue that it is possible to envision how climate transition can be facilitated by an

¹⁹ Importantly, while there are companies governed by other aims than profit, the notion of climate capitalism does not necessarily demand an abandonment of profit per se or even profit for personal gain. A complete disregard for profit is a notion hard to reconcile with any version of capitalism, but there are less radical versions of climate capitalism qua capitalism. Some versions aim to complement profit-seeking motives with other objectives, thus making the motivational structure more complex, and potentially less cynical. Others work to provide pragmatic legitimacy to sustainability work in the commercial sector by appealing to motives already inherent therein. Indeed, the primary aim of efforts to develop climate capitalism is to *support climate transition as a means to profit*, utilizing mechanism supporting the legitimacy of climate considerations in relation to economic aims, by taking account of aspects such as (a) that sustainability work and communication can facilitate sales, (b) that costs can be cut by developing smarter or more effective production processes, and (c) that the idea of contributing to a better world can ease the inner workings of a company, in terms of for example work ethics, recruitment, or general employee well-being and loyalty. Finally, (d) sustainability work might provide the organization with a general sense of direction.

increased awareness of its rhetorical dimension in general and an adoption of high standards concerning green marketing in particular.

In a wide sense, the group of climate capitalists includes all companies that undertake *to support climate transition* as an integral aspect of their organizations, thus complementing, or sometimes even supplanting, the interest of profit. A possible internationally well-known example is the outdoor equipment company Patagonia, under its new ownership (mentioned in Sect. 9.3). An example from the Swedish energy sector is the electricity trading company GodEL,²⁰ which also portrays itself as this sort of company, emphasizing how it sells electricity from renewable sources and transfers all profit to charities. There have been debates on how effective it is to donate indirectly, by trading with a company that donates its profit, but for our purposes, it exemplifies how *the financial bottom line versus public good conflict* can be negotiated in various ways.²¹

From our conversation on energy marketing and climate transition, it appears that considering the concept of prudence and the virtue framework can offer enriching perspectives. Beyond that, the discussion above indicates the *need for further research exploring the complex functions of green marketing in the energy market*. To indicate future directions for such research, building on the perspectives presented in this volume, the virtue framework would benefit from being further developed by:

- A. identifying virtues for framing the challenge of climate change, as well as the premises of climate transition,
- B. exploring rhetorical virtues for communicating complex products positioned within a complex system,
- C. further developing the understanding of green marketing as a societal performance of virtue, by focusing not only on consumer marketing but also on business-to-business relations as well as business–government dynamics, and
- D. critically discussing the complex motivational structures of different commercial actors in relation to their different stakeholders.

²⁰The UK energy company Good Energy is a comparable English language example.

²¹One way is to introduce more bottom lines, see, for example, Dyck and Manchanda 2021 with references, on the “Triple Bottom Line” approach where companies’ reports have a financial, social, and ecological bottom line.

Our discussion of corporate rhetoric in the energy sector indicates that to facilitate virtuous marketing, in the sense that we imagine in this book, we need to go beyond general one-size-fits-all principles and lists. Researchers, businesses, and other stakeholders must work to make those lists and principles more concrete. They must re-negotiate them in relation to the unique challenges of various sectors where such virtues are applicable. Here, we would like to remind the reader of the five analytical principles presented in Chap. 8:

- Principle 1—The principle of situationality
- Principle 2—The principle of multiple motives
- Principle 3—The principle of multiple effects
- Principle 4—The principle of multiple audiences
- Principle 5—The principle of prudence and transparency

We believe that these principles can aid in the necessary process of concretization. The way we see it, they have a broad applicability. The principles can be used in various contexts and be helpful in performing analyses of marketing virtue.

To bring this discussion to a close, green marketing in the energy sector is an important and timely topic as we strive to move toward a more sustainable future. It is crucial for companies and industry organizations as well as legislators, legal practitioners, and environmental organizations to understand the possible benefits of green marketing. Green marketing does not only affect the corporate bottom line. It can also play a part in safeguarding the environment and supporting climate transition. As by now must be clear, from our perspective this is the rationale for supporting green marketing. Nevertheless, to help develop green marketing into a force that influences people and guides behavior in a more climate-friendly direction, we should accept that the pursuit of profit is at the heart of current marketing practices. Profit is the guiding light of the contemporary capitalist structure. However, it is possible to accept the importance of the profit motive without abandoning all reflection and criticism. You do not need to capitulate to cynicism or embrace the practices it leads to, such as misleading advertising and greenwashing. Nor do you need to accept an ever-increasing consumerism, as if it were an inevitable and natural state. In this chapter, we have discussed how marketing, as communication, is unavoidably influenced by the context in which it is performed and how the context must also influence what performances should be considered

ethical. While some general points have been made—such as that complexity should not be overly suppressed, that different types of knowledge can have varying levels of (in)effectiveness as drivers of change, and that motives (or combinations of motives) need to be considered when discussing how to best facilitate virtuous action—we have also identified the need to develop our theoretical framework further, to make it more concrete and directly applicable to different areas of marketing. For such developments, the energy system provides an especially interesting example. In part, this is due to its characteristics, as regards the products, the highly regulated atmosphere, and the in turn sophisticated discursive conditions. The energy system is, indeed, technically and regulatory complex, with many interconnected parts, regions, and actors who must all interact successfully. It is also the perhaps singularly most important factor in climate transition ahead, as modern life as we know it is so inextricably tied to energy usage—a need which is indeed growing as new technologies develop, old energy sources need to be phased out, and as people around the globe strive toward better living conditions. Thus, the communicative conditions of the energy system need to be considered a crucial matter going forward. The virtue framework we have presented can aid that work.

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Green Marketing as Manifest Performance of Ethical Judgment

Abstract This chapter concludes the book's discussion and emphasizes the need for discursive conditions and a constructive marketing critique that encourages virtuous marketing practices. The chapter also relates the virtue-framework to the field of marketing ethics, as well as other strands of research, and suggests avenues for future interdisciplinary work. We argue that rhetorical scholarship can contribute to the collaborative effort of steering market dynamics in more sustainable directions.

Keywords Rhetorical copia • Environmental communication • Market advocacy • Marketing ethics

In a nutshell, what we have tried to advance in this book is the merits of imagining discursive conditions in which green marketing can contribute to combating climate change. The idea at the heart of the book is that green marketing can influence opinion and guide praxis in ways contributing to climate transition. Instead of merely chastising transgressions, we should attempt to harness the potential of the massively influential tool marketing has proven to be. To do this, we do need to discourage certain marketing practices. Given existing discursive conditions, however, it seems at least as important to encourage the kind of constructive behavior we want more of. We should point to positive exemplars, articulate the reasons for their positive evaluation, and perhaps even work to maintain a

rhetorical *copia* of virtuous green marketing, for different areas and marketing channels. Hopefully, such efforts can shift the focus, from merely discouraging the current race to the bottom of innovative greenwashing practices, to also encouraging the opposite tendencies. There are good examples out there, and encouraging them could, potentially, provide the necessary fuel for a race to the top, in an envisioned spiral of virtue.

In presenting that vision, we map out an area of research that is by constitution interdisciplinary, drawing not only from rhetoric and law, but also from communication studies, sociology, economics, and of course business-oriented marketing studies. Still—and this is a key point—this perspective cannot only be viewed as a reasonable addition to be implemented within existing paradigms of the social sciences, such as in management, organization theory, and business studies. Our book is also a call for humanistic scholarship, as it evokes fundamental questions that require qualitative analysis of symbol use, combined with philosophical reflection. Consequently, we must, on the one hand, admit the parallels between the perspectives put forward here and views found in other academic fields studying marketing. On the other hand, we should also note the scarcity of previous attempts to combine a humanistic Rhetoric & Law-approach with a constructive take on green corporate rhetoric. We aim to open up the area of constructive green marketing to scholars of rhetoric, and to contribute to the development of a research field of sustainability rhetoric that takes corporate rhetoric seriously. At the same time, we want to introduce a more theoretical rhetorical perspective to scholarship that has traditionally treated corporate rhetoric from a more pragmatic, hands-on, sometimes shallow, perspective. The pragmatic nature of such traditional perspectives (touched on in Chap. 4) is logical, considering they have regularly been adopted in higher education milieus servicing the business sector's personnel needs. However, that traditional perspective can be enriched by interdisciplinary dialogue.

One way to provide a more in-depth understanding of rhetoric is to explore the concept of rhetorical ontology: how rhetoric shapes our understanding of the world, and ourselves as part of it. In this volume, we engage with fundamental aspects of rhetoric through our treatments of the historically anchored paradigms of Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates. In comparing their very different approaches to rhetoric, we exemplify what the humanistic perspective—in our view—can offer. Their paradigms provide alternate routes, and reflecting on alternatives add value to discussions of very contemporary societal challenges, as choices between

different routes have consequences. Considering the classical tradition provides a means of taking a step back, to question our own perspectives, methods, and assumptions. In doing so, we find that the tradition of Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian, and their notion of the virtuous orator striving for the common good, can aid us in raising fundamental questions about our society. They can help us envision a future where corporate rhetoric can fill a constructive function in the transition toward a sustainable market system.

If we work at the intersections of the disciplines that investigate the phenomena of green marketing, and draw upon developments in disciplines with related interests, we can develop an eclectic approach, utilizing the concepts and results best suited to guide our work (Kuypers 2016). One area of research that has a lot to offer is *environmental communication*—a field that, at the same time, could benefit from future interdisciplinary research endeavors, considering the limited attention given to commercial rhetoric within that field today (cf. Hansen and Cox 2015; Pezzullo and Cox 2022; Takahashi et al. 2022). Indeed, looking at handbooks in Environmental Communication, we can see that commercial rhetoric is rarely thematized at all. Instead, the tendency is to focus on media framing, public policy, popular culture, environmental movements, and research communication. When corporate rhetoric is treated, it is commonly presented as a bad Other, for instance, in discussing the rhetoric of Big Oil and the “merchants of doubt” (Miller and Dinan 2015), or insofar as it is a target of social movement campaigns. An interesting concept in the latter area is *market advocacy*, a strategic way for activism to utilize market logics, including the use of boycotts and divestment campaigns, as well as “buycots” (the affirmative opposite of boycotts) and investment campaigns promoting desired practices (Pezzullo and Cox 2022). These discussions are all interesting, with the latter in particular contributing an important perspective on how the transition to virtuous green marketing practices can be facilitated. All in all, however, the current discussions within environmental communication offer something very different from what we propose here.

A field with which we more clearly overlap, though we have thus far only touched upon it tangentially, is *marketing ethics*. To anyone in marketing ethics, there will be obvious links between that field and what we propose here. While current approaches to marketing ethics do not supply any self-sustained solutions to the problems we engage with, studies in that field can no doubt contribute with enriching perspectives. For

example, Thompson (2002) has tried to “market virtue”—promoting the relevance of virtue-perspectives in the marketing field. He attempts to sell the idea of replacing marketing practices based on consumerism, and artificial stimulation of consumer needs, with more ethical marketing practices, performed by marketers as moral agents. Thompson takes as his starting point a conventional story about the roots of modern marketing, and how it originated as a tool for the common good. Specifically, it was a tool for informing agricultural consumers about farm-gate prices, to counteract “suspected manipulation of prices by middlemen to the detriment of producers and consumers alike”. Following this origin story, Thompson argues for the adoption of a deontological framework for marketers. In his view, they should be bound by a number of duties to foster marketing practices that can service common needs and contribute to the good of society.¹

Another example is provided by Dyck and Manchanda (2021) who, like Thompson, give some overview of the field of marketing ethics. Their main contribution is however an argument for radically rethinking the “4 Ps of marketing” (product, price, place, and promotion). By taking account of Aristotelian virtue ethics, and actively contrasting it to the purportedly dominant consequentialism of mainstream utilitarianism, they argue against a “more is better” ideology. They argue that it is a driver of cynical marketing strategies, artificially stimulating consumer needs to enhance organizations’ financial well-being while disregarding or misvaluing other consequences. Dyck and Manchanda argue for what amounts to a fundamental rethinking of a dominant economic worldview and for the adoption of a different ideology as guiding light. By proclaiming that “enough is enough”, they seek to offer an alternative for anyone concerned that the current utilitarian approach is having dysfunctional consequences for the world, as well as for those who suspect that, even at their best, current practices are inadequate.

Our perspective is congruent with both of these approaches, as well as with other work in the field of marketing ethics that highlights the problematic logics of consumerism or advocates for ethical considerations. Our approach is, however, to some extent, new—or at least different, and possibly less radical—in that it focuses on rhetorical virtues in light of a rhetorical ontology. Our argument is not primarily moral, in the sense of presenting a moral appeal or imperative, but rather political. We discuss how to order a society, with its practices, norms, and written rules, and how to do that in a

¹Thompson discusses five duties, namely: the duty to honesty and exactitude, the duty to gratitude, the duty to justice, the duty to self-improvement, and the duty not to place the health or safety of others in danger.

way that serves the common good, including the facilitation of climate transition, and the establishment of a market within planetary boundaries.

As already mentioned, there are no quick fixes, or ready-made concrete solutions, but if we continue to work in dialogue, partaking of each other's contributions, and working at disciplinary intersections, and in dialogue with surrounding society, we ought to be able to make transformative headway. A constructive framing of such an endeavor might be to envision marketing channels as a stage for the public performance of ethical judgment, and for the evaluation of green marketing performances as such, in order to hold them to high ethical standards.

This reconsideration on how to understand marketing should not be limited to a scholarly discourse. On the contrary, we believe that it could and should influence how we—as societies—understand marketing and evaluate the construction of corporate ethos. Our overarching argument in this book has already been made, but in short, it is not about building an ivory tower with certain rules for ethically correct marketing. Instead, we hope to contribute to the shaping of a collaborative movement that can explore how certain dynamics in a market economy could function differently, and work to shine a light on alternative and more sustainable ways of performing marketing.

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INDEX

A

Altruism, 26, 75
Aristotle, 8, 32, 34–38, 52,
80, 88, 103
Atomism, 122
Audience, 76
 construction, 84–91, 118
 elite, 81
 mode of perception, 90
 multiple, 77, 80, 107, 135
 particular, 80, 82
 supervisory, 81, 107
 target, 26, 76, 84, 88, 103,
 115, 118
 universal, 80, 82, 85
Authenticity, 38, 45, 106
Authority, 104
Average consumer, 83, 86, 90
Awards, 14, 101

B

Bad Man, 67
Bandwagon fallacy, 102, 104

Behavioral guidance, 3, 9, 78,
131, 141
Biofuel, 127
Bullshit, 3, 76

C

Capitalism, 15, 24, 26, 59, 62, 70, 75,
108, 116, 117, 133, 135, 144
Carefulness, 61
Certification, 97, 99, 102, 104,
107, 111
Charity, 109, 134
Cicero, 8, 42, 44–47, 52, 62
Circular, 113, 115, 116
Climate, 7
 communication, 62
 crisis, 13
 psychology, 133
 transition, 9, 13, 118, 125,
 135, 145
 transition rhetoric, 7, 15, 62,
 120, 131
Clothing, 107–119

Commercial rhetoric, 13
 Complexity, 32, 122–125, 132,
 133, 136
 Consistency, *see* Virtue, consistency
 Constructive approach, 2, 7, 15, 24,
 41, 47, 48, 61, 63, 67–69, 71,
 124, 131, 141
 Consumption, 69, 79, 89, 98, 99,
 110, 116–121
 Context clues, 86
 Corporate rhetoric, 5, 7, 58, 114, 124
 and identity, 23
 Corporate storytelling, 3, 110
 Criticism, 6, 13, 39, 45, 65, 69, 74,
 118, 122, 124, 131
 rhetorical criticism, 14, 62, 78
 Cynicism, 27, 47, 69, 135

D

Decorum, 47
 Decoupling, 26, 37
 Definitions, 4
 Demagoguery, 79
 Distributive equality, 60, 62
 Doxa, 20, 21, 37–39, 46, 60, 69, 108,
 118, 130, 141

E

Ecolabels, 96–107
 as brands, 105
 and rhetoric, 98, 100
 and virtue, 103
 Eco-marketing, *see* Green marketing
 Education, 43, 46, 47, 106, 125, 126,
 128, 142
 Energy, 119–136
 market, 120
 Environmental communication, 7,
 120, 131, 143
 Environmental labels, *see* Ecolabels

Environmental marketing, *see* Green
 marketing
 Ethos, 31–34, 60, 99, 113, 145
 borrowed ethos, 35, 109
 and corporate identity, 23
 and differentiation, 23, 110, 128
 discursive, 32, 38
 green, 47, 110, 117
 green ethos, 5, 8
 and image, 23, 32, 114
 and imitation, 23, 47, 51
 and legitimacy, 21
 primary (*see also* Ethos, prior)
 prior, 32, 39
 secondary (*see also* Ethos, discursive)
 Eunoia, *see* Virtue, goodwill

F

False friends, *see* Third party
 endorsement
 Fracking, 58, 130
 Frameworks
 analytical, 9, 104, 131, 135
 democratic, 122
 as simplifications, 63
 Frameworks legal, *see* Legal
 frameworks
 Framing, 60, 90, 123, 130, 132, 145
 climate change, 61
 in green marketing, 60
 Freedom of speech, 67, 106
 Friendship, 35

G

Genre, 37, 87
 Good marketing practice, 66, 68
 Green, 3
 legitimization, 16
 promises, 3, 6, 9, 14, 32, 68, 113,
 119, 120

Green marketing, 3, 5, 9, 13, 83, 104,
108, 121, 132
and social dynamics, 24
Greenwashing, 1, 6, 14, 54–58, 83

H

Hermeneutics of suspicion, 15
History, 8, 41–48, 70, 144
rhetorical tradition, 10, 24, 34, 38

I

Iconography, 96
Inertia, 25, 131
Information deficit, 105, 131
Institution, 8
Institutional theory, 10, 19, 22–24,
36, 44, 60, 70, 76
and climate change, 22
homogenizing effects, 23
as process, 22
as product, 22
Instrumentalism, 123
Interdisciplinary, 2, 6, 16, 31, 34, 62,
65, 70, 104, 142, 145
Isocrates, 8, 41–44, 47, 52, 62, 143

L

Law and rhetoric, 16
Legal frameworks, 5, 9, 16,
65–69, 86, 90
soft law, 26, 68, 70
Legal implications, 9, 16, 19, 47,
65–71, 76, 131, 135
negative focus, 66
Legitimacy, 8, 16, 19–22, 70, 112
cognitive, 20, 24, 26, 108
conformative legitimation,
25, 31, 33

and ethos, 31, 32, 36
gaining, 21, 24–27, 31, 47, 108
green, 39, 47
of green marketing, 69
maintaining, 21, 25, 108
management, 21
manipulative legitimation, 25, 26,
31, 33, 60, 70
moral, 20, 24, 26, 37, 108
pragmatic, 20, 24, 26, 108
repairing, 21, 25
selective legitimation, 25, 31,
33, 60
strategic, 19
Logistics, 111, 119
Lying, 54, 58

M

Marketing
as communication, 5
ethics, 143
relationship, 112, 129, 130
as rhetoric, 46
studies, 5, 88
Materials, 111, 113, 115
Memory, 45
Morality, 37, 66, 67
accounting, 109
See also Rhetoric, and ethics
Moral spectra, 2
Motives, 75
multiple, 76, 108, 135
Myth, 67

N

Naturalize, 20
Nomos, 70
Nuclear power, 121, 125
Nudging, 132

O

Ontology, *see* Rhetorical ontology
 Organizational environment, 22, 25

P

Pan-Hellenism, 42
 Paradigms, 51, 62, 63, 141
 Pedagogy, *see* Rhetoric, and pedagogy
 Petroleum, 60, 61, 101, 110, 117,
 127, 130
 Philia, *see* Friendship
 Phronēsis, *see* Virtue, prudence
 Plato, 15, 38, 42, 79
 Podcasts, 124
 Polarization, 79, 118
 Policy work, 10
 Post-truth, 15, 84
 Practical wisdom, *see* Virtue, prudence
 Prudence, *see* Virtue, prudence
 Puffery, 14

Q

Quality, 111
 Quintilian, 8, 42, 44–46, 52, 62, 143

R

Referential tactics, 105
Reklamombudsmannen, 82
 Rhetoric
 as art, 38
 and the common good, 42, 44,
 125, 134
 constitutive, 77, 78
 and ethics, 37, 39, 42, 44, 46, 52,
 54, 57, 59, 61, 62, 70, 74, 79,
 83, 123, 134, 141–145
 and morality, 37–39
 and pedagogy, 43, 46, 47, 106, 125,
 126, 131

 and virtue, 52
 Rhetorical ontology, 37–39, 52, 57,
 75, 115, 142
 Rhetorical situation, 32, 39,
 74, 77, 87
 Rhetorical tradition, 8, 41–48,
 62, 70, 74

S

Second persona, 77, 78, 85
 Segmentation, 88
 Selection/deflection, 55, 83, 106,
 116, 120, 123, 125, 130
 Shame, 44
 Shaming, 69
 Sins of greenwashing, 2, 9, 52, 58
 Situationality, 74, 135
 Skepticism, 15, 42, 47, 104
 green skepticism, 15
 Social dynamic, 8, 19, 21, 33, 35,
 37, 44, 45, 48, 75, 81, 124,
 130, 145
 Social dynamic behavioral
 guidance, 70
 Social engineering, 65
 Standardization, 99, 102
 Stylistic virtues
 clarity, 53
 correctness, 53
 decorum, 53
 evidence, 53
 ornateness, 53
 Sustainability reports, 3, 45, 115
 Sustainable marketing, *see* Green
 marketing

T
 Taxonomy, 121
 Temporality, 33, 35, 45, 48, 79, 113,
 121, 128

Third-party endorsement, 35, 56, 97,
98, 100, 102, 103, 106, 109, 112
Topos, 51, 63, 67, 68, 87, 89
Transition, 3
Typologization, 6
Typology, 9, 48

U

Unfairness, 66

V

Vir bonus, 46

Virtue

aretē, 34, 36, 52, 84
balanced disclosure, 55, 110, 113,
116, 120, 123, 125
brevity, 116
clarity, 62
comparisons, 55, 116, 123
consistency, 45, 46, 52
correctness, 62
courage, 42

decorum, 44, 52, 53
eloquentia, 44
evidence, 56
goodwill, 34, 52, 84
justice, 42, 52, 62
moderation, 42, 52
pathos, 55
piety, 42, 43
preciseness, 55, 104, 111, 115
prudence, 34, 45, 52, 83, 84, 112,
122, 124, 133, 135
relevance, 55, 100, 116, 123
and rhetoric, 42
selection/deflection, 60, 110
specificity, 55, 104, 111
transparency, 55, 83, 84, 105, 116,
119, 135
truthfulness, 56, 58, 68
wisdom, 42, 44, 62

W

Websites, 111, 112, 128
Witness, 35