



PART 3

Read the text below and answer questions 27–40.

BEYOND SHOPPING: THE LIMITS AND FUTURE OF ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

A

Ethical consumption is frequently presented as a market-friendly route to social change: if enough people purchase “better” goods, firms will compete to improve, and harmful practices will be priced out. There is some empirical plausibility here. Consumer demand can fund alternatives, create reputational risk, and make previously hidden harms legible to a wider public. Yet critics argue that ethical consumption is routinely asked to carry a burden it cannot bear. Many of the most damaging outcomes are structural—embedded in energy systems, trade rules, and profit incentives—and therefore cannot be corrected through individual choice alone. The result is a recurring tension between moral aspiration and political economy: a private act of shopping is treated as if it were a substitute for collective governance.

B

A first limit concerns scale and market failure. Individual purchases are fragmented, while the systems that produce labour exploitation or environmental harm operate at the level of industries, logistics networks, and national regulation. A consumer may avoid one brand yet still depend on carbon-intensive grids, global shipping routes, and input markets that shape most impacts regardless of which logo appears on the label. This mismatch creates a collective action problem: the benefits of “doing the right thing” are widely dispersed, while the costs—time, higher prices, inconvenience—are concentrated on the individual. In such conditions, ethical demand may shift niche segments without reliably transforming the dominant infrastructure that determines baseline harm.

C

A second limit is inequality, which turns ethics into a premium category. The popular phrase “vote with your wallet” assumes disposable income and access to credible alternatives, yet ethical goods often cost more and are unevenly available by neighbourhood. This can transform moral choice into a status marker: the ability to purchase certified goods becomes evidence not only of values but of class position. The result is political as well as psychological. Those priced out may experience moral resentment, feeling judged by people whose ethical identity depends on expenditures others cannot afford. Conversely, higher-income consumers may engage in moral licensing—treating one approved purchase as permission for other forms of consumption—thereby blunting the intended reduction in overall harm.



D

A third limit is informational, rooted in information asymmetry. Even highly motivated consumers cannot easily verify supply-chain claims, compare standards across certifiers, or detect greenwashing when firms disclose selectively. Cognitive overload is common: decision-making is compressed into moments at the point of purchase, while the relevant evidence is technical, fragmented, and contested. Marketing incentives intensify the problem, because firms can compete on narratives rather than outcomes when measurement is unclear. Over time, repeated disappointment can produce cynicism. Some consumers disengage, concluding that ethical choice is too confusing to navigate or that the marketplace is engineered to simulate responsibility without delivering it. This withdrawal is not apathy so much as a rational response to persistent uncertainty.

E

These constraints have led many scholars to argue for a shift from consumer responsibility to shared governance. Policy can reduce the burden on individuals by setting minimum standards, requiring disclosures, and penalising misleading claims. Importantly, regulation can change the competitive landscape: if baseline rules prevent corner-cutting, ethical practices become less costly relative to unethical ones, and firms cannot gain advantage simply by externalising harm. Yet policy is not automatically benign. Regulatory capture can occur when powerful industries shape standards to protect incumbents or to legitimise minimal change. Even so, the central claim remains: ethical consumption becomes more effective when it operates within enforceable rules that convert values into obligations rather than optional branding.

F

Collective action offers a further direction beyond individual shopping. Cooperatives, unions, and community purchasing groups can negotiate conditions and demand accountability in ways that isolated consumers cannot. Coordinated boycotts may be more effective when they are paired with clear demands, timelines, and protections for workers rather than simple withdrawal. Collective approaches also allow people with limited budgets to participate through organisation rather than premium spending, reducing the inequality built into “wallet voting”. In political-economy terms, they can transform a scattered set of preferences into bargaining power, shifting ethical consumption from a personal identity project toward a form of civic practice.

G

Finally, business models and profit structures matter as much as consumer intent. If a firm’s profitability depends on volume growth, it can add an ethical product line while continuing to expand overall throughput and associated harm. This is a familiar pattern in



green markets: “ethical” becomes a segment strategy rather than a systemic transition. A more robust shift would involve circular-economy models based on durability, repair, service, or reuse—approaches that lower material and energy demand rather than merely polishing supply chains. However, such models require infrastructure, cultural acceptance, and policy support; without these, ethical options remain marginal and easily absorbed into business-as-usual expansion. The future of ethical consumption therefore lies not in abandoning markets entirely, but in combining consumer signals with regulation, collective organisation, and redesigned production systems that make lower harm the default rather than the premium exception.

Questions 27–31

Choose the correct heading for each paragraph.

List of Headings

- i The potential of digital tracking to verify supply chains
- ii Shifting the burden from the shopper to the state
- iii The social divisiveness of high-cost ethical options
- iv How feeling virtuous can lead to negative behaviour
- v Leveraging group power to negotiate better terms
- vi Why individual actions struggle to address systemic infrastructure
- vii Profit incentives that undermine genuine sustainability
- viii Information overload and the rational retreat from decision-making
- ix Arguments for removing market forces entirely

27 Paragraph B

28 Paragraph C

29 Paragraph D

30 Paragraph E

31 Paragraph F

Questions 32–36

Which paragraph contains the following information? Choose the correct letter, **A–G**. **NB** You may use any letter more than once.



32 The claim that consumers can switch brands yet still remain dependent on wider infrastructures that determine most impacts.

33 The suggestion that ethical shopping can function as a marker of class position and provoke resentment among those excluded by price.

34 The argument that repeated disappointment with claims and standards may lead people to disengage from ethical choice altogether.

35 The view that coordinated organisations can enable participation without relying on premium spending.

36 The point that lowering harm requires changing how firms profit, not merely adding an “ethical” product segment.

Questions 37–40

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

37 The passage suggests that ethical consumer demand can sometimes create reputational pressure that encourages firms to respond.

38 The passage argues that ethical consumption, by itself, is sufficient to solve structural environmental and labour problems.

39 The passage implies that higher prices can contribute to ethical consumption becoming linked to status and resentment.

40 The passage states that coordinated boycotts usually succeed within six months when supported by unions.

Answer Key

27. vi

28. iii

29. viii

30. ii

31. v

32. B



33. C

34. D

35. F

36. G

37. TRUE

38. FALSE

39. TRUE

40. NOT GIVEN