

## TransTRA Workshop\*

### ***Imagining sustainable societies***

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### ***the question of 'human nature'***

*Join us for an afternoon workshop to explore the neural underpinnings of decision-making when market forces conflict with morality.*

*We aim to foster transdisciplinary collaboration among researchers in economics, cognitive psychology, and sustainability science, to investigate the neuro-cognitive mechanisms of collective moral decision-making in a market context.*

#### **When:**

2 December, 2024; 12:00-17:15

#### **Where:**

Impulse Center, Adenauerallee 131, 53113, Bonn, Raum 2.001

#### **To join:**

Email Neha Rana [s4nerana@uni-bonn.de] *until Monday 25.11.2024* with 2-3 sentences about your background and why you'd like to join. Limited slots available.

# Schedule

## 12:00 Arrival and Flying Lunch

**12:45** Introduction: *Oliver Braganza, Johannes Schultz, Wolfram Barfuss*

**13:00** Jakob Kapeller:

*Historical perspectives on moral erosion in markets*

**13:30** Andreas Ziegler, Theo Offermann:

*Experimental findings on moral erosion in markets*

## 14:30 Coffee break

**15:00** Christian Ruff:

*Neural foundations of moral preferences*

**16:00** Johannes Schultz, Oliver Braganza:

*Developing an experimental adaptation of Ziegler et al. 2024 for fMRI analysis*

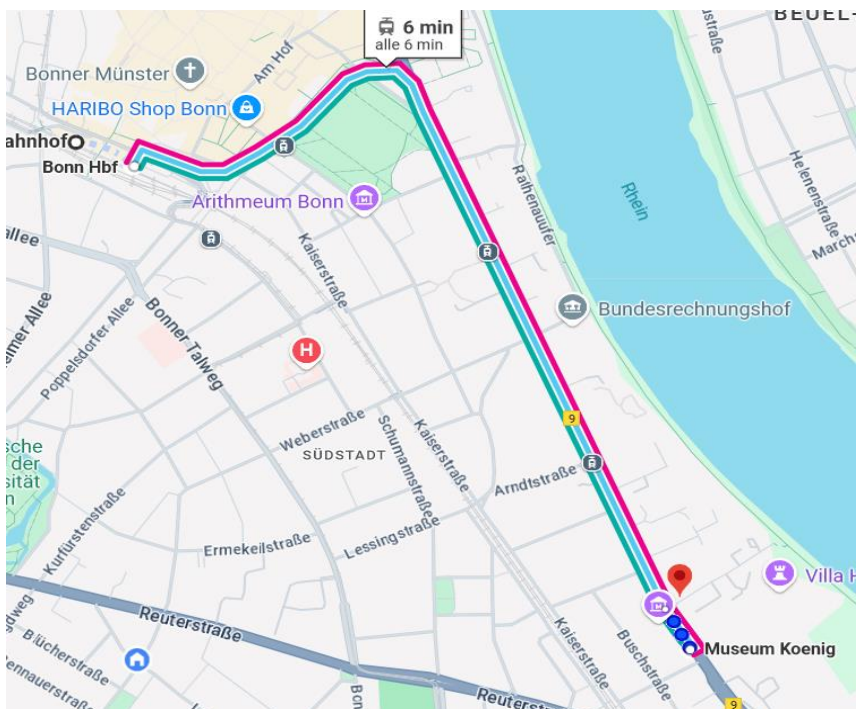
## 17:00 Coffee break

**16:15** Discussion session:

*Neural foundations of morals in markets*

**17:15** End (public part)

## Location



Impulse Center,  
Adenauerallee 131,  
53113, Bonn,  
Raum 2.001

# Project description

## Imagining sustainable societies – the question of ‘human nature’

Oliver Braganza, Johannes Schultz, Wolfram Barfuss

Join us for an afternoon workshop on 02.12.2024 to bring together researchers at the interface of economics, cognitive psychology and sustainability science, to explore the neural underpinnings of decision making in situations in which market forces conflict with individual morality.

A key obstacle to imagining sustainable societies are narratives that cast the status quo as a quasi-inevitable consequence of human nature. Indeed, cultural analysis (e.g. Fisher, 2009) shows that many contemporaries find it easier to imagine the “end of the world” than the major changes in human behavior claimed necessary by sustainability scientists (O’Neill et al., 2018). Pessimism is furnished, for instance, by the well-documented value-action gap (ElHaffar et al., 2020), whereby stated environmental goals and moral values continue to be routinely missed or disregarded. Some interpret this gap between words and deeds as betraying a dark truth - that our morality is *empty talk* and inaction derives, ultimately, from a fundamentally immoral human nature. It is difficult to overstate the implications of such a sweeping inference for our ability to imagine sustainable societies, which may depend critically on individuals and society choosing moral actions, both as consumers and as voters.

A more optimistic interpretation casts the gap as resulting from social and institutional determinants of behavior (e.g., Andre et al., 2024). Simulations (Braganza, 2022) predict that an institutional setup of ‘proxy-based competition’ robustly *induces the erosion of the moral behavior that individuals would otherwise prefer*. Indeed, powerful new experimental evidence by Ziegler et al. (2024) bears this prediction out in an experimental market context, incidentally revealing profound frustration about the circumstance. This not only helps to explain the value-action gap and informs how it can be addressed, it also furnishes a far more optimistic view of ‘human nature’. The upshot is that a better understanding of the psychology and neuroscience of (im)moral decision-making, might strengthen the perhaps most fundamental prerequisite to achieving a sustainable society – the ability to imagine it. Yet, to cite Ugazio et al. (2022), “it is remarkable how little we understand about the neural and cognitive mechanisms that determine moral decision-making”.

### References

- Andre, P., Boneva, T., Chopra, F., Falk, A., 2024. Globally representative evidence on the actual and perceived support for climate action. *Nat. Clim. Change* 14, 253–259.
- Braganza, O., 2022. Proxyeconomics, a theory and model of proxy-based competition and cultural evolution. *R. Soc. Open Sci.* 9, 1–41.
- Braganza, O., John, Y.J., Caldwell, L., McCoy, D.E., 2024. Teleonomy, legibility, and diversity: Do we need more “proxynomics”? *Behav. Brain Sci.* 47, e88.
- ElHaffar, G., Durif, F., Dubé, L., 2020. Towards closing the attitude-intention-behavior gap in green consumption: A narrative review of the literature and an overview of future research directions. *J. Clean. Prod.* 275, 122556.
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- O’Neill, D.W., Fanning, A.L., Lamb, W.F., Steinberger, J.K., 2018. A good life for all within planetary boundaries. *Nat. Sustain.* 2018 12 1, 88–95.
- Ugazio, G., Grueschow, M., Polania, R., Lamm, C., Tobler, P., Ruff, C., 2022. Neuro-computational foundations of moral preferences. *Soc. Cogn. Affect. Neurosci.* 17, 253–265.
- Ziegler, A.G.B., Romagnoli, G., Offerman, T., 2024. Morals in Multi-Unit Markets. *J. Eur. Econ. Assoc.* jvae001.

<sup>1</sup>Briefly, Ziegler et al. (2024) building on the groundbreaking work by Falk and Szech (2013), address the centuries old question of whether markets erode morals experimentally. Their central innovation is the design of a truly ‘competitive’ (i.e. multi-unit) market in the controlled laboratory context. Results showed that individuals who refrain from an immoral trade for personal gain in an individual decision making condition, are induced to make it in the competitive market condition. Further experiments show that the effect is driven by the ‘replacement logic’, i.e. the reasoning that refraining from an immoral trade will simply lead to someone else making that trade, and thus make no difference. Importantly, participants often seemed to feel trapped by this dynamic, simultaneously engaging in immoral behavior and expressing deep frustration about it.