SPRINGS

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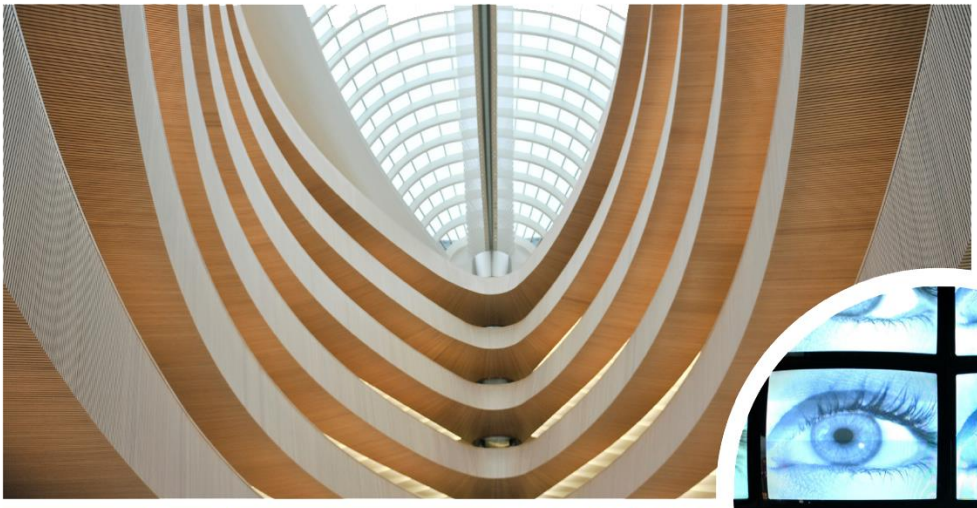

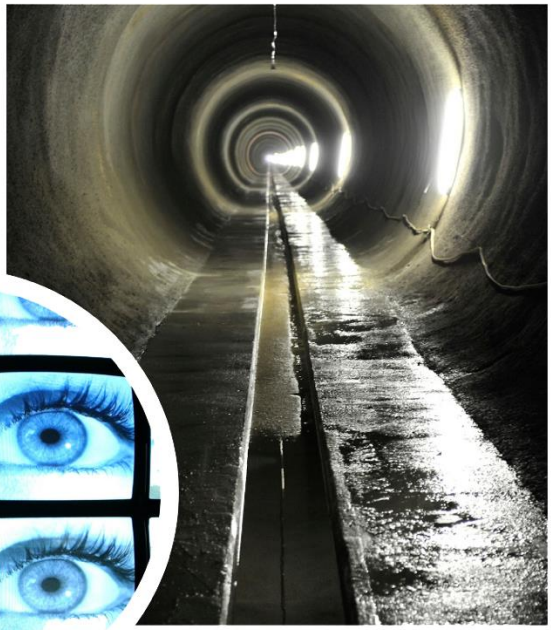

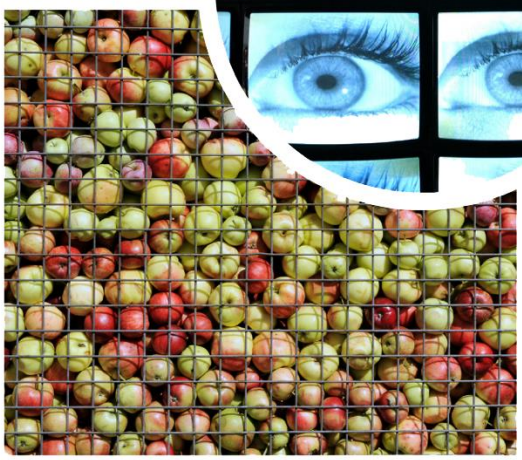

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I STILL DO A LOT OF GOOD

Nina Wormbs

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Nina Wormbs

Economic thinking permeates our modern societies. It is so pervasive that we do not reflect on the fact that it rules much of what we do. But we might want to think about the consequences for the transition to a sustainable society. They are not all straightforward.

In a recent research project, my colleague Maria Wolrath Söderberg and I wanted to know how people argued about their decisions in response to climate change.[1] In a survey circulated through social media in the late spring of 2019, we asked people who considered themselves as having sustainable values, if they had ever acted against their knowledge or intention, and if so, how they had reasoned with themselves to feel better. We know that when we do something that goes against our conviction, we experience what psychologists have called cognitive dissonance, but the struggle to reconcile behaviour and values is also emotional.

To feel better, we need to justify our behaviour to ourselves and our imagined audience. We do this through a process of internal deliberation. In the research project, we studied this experience of cognitive dissonance as it manifested itself in the open-text answers in our survey. We looked for thought structures and patterns using topos theory, first presented by Aristotle. Topoi are modes of reasoning that work in our social context and that can create meaning.

> *Economic thinking is so pervasive that we do not reflect on the fact that it rules much of what we do.*

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It was striking that the most common ways of reasoning were economic, a recurring type of transactional thinking where people seem to envision an account; an idea of a budget was also visible.[2] One example is telling: "I hardly ever eat meat and I do not fly anymore. And I don't have a car and bike to and from work. I am pretty sustainable. Now I am hungry and want to eat meat." The aberration of occasionally eating a steak—contrary to the ideal vegetarian or vegan lifestyle—is balanced out by a usually low-carbon diet and the use of sustainable transport. The idea is that it evens out.

This also occurs in typical reasoning to legitimise flying: "[I] am thinking that apart from flying I am relatively smart climate-wise, I am vegetarian and have also cut down on dairy." The budget thinking in this example is latent. The reasoning presupposes that everyone is granted a certain emission quota, and if you cut back on meat and dairy, you are allowed to fly. The problem with this thinking, however, is the size of emissions. It depends a lot on how much you fly and where, but for frequent flyers (more than two trips a year), it is difficult to balance flying with a vegetarian diet.[3]

The following quote from the survey captures the idea: "I still do a lot of good, for example, bike to work." In order for this transaction to function, the currency needs to be imagined as good or bad deeds. We envision that good deeds can balance out the bad ones. This is often true in social relations. But when this type of logic is transferred to climate thinking, the consequences are unexpected. To buy an organic T-shirt might be considered a good deed. However, when you try to be even better, and buy five T-shirts, you have not necessarily been a better citizen. Certainly not if you only need one.

> *We envision that good deeds can balance out the bad ones. But when this type of logic is transferred to climate thinking, the consequences are unexpected.*

Buying items that are organic, fair-trade, or in other ways considered climate-friendly, and thinking that it is a deposit in an imagined climate account, has been termed "the negative footprint illusion." The mistake is forgetting that almost everything we do emits greenhouse gases, even things that are labelled as fair, like chocolate or coffee. The transactions many of our respondents envisioned were examples of a latent budget thinking, which, however, went astray since they did not know the size and proportions. To compare flying with recycling, as though they were comparable, is problematic.

Etymologically, economy comes from Ancient Greek and means to keep house, in particular if resources are scarce. To think economically ought to be a way forward to saving our planet. But we must not compare apples and pears, nor can we act as though a withdrawal is a deposit. If we employ economic thinking, we need to get the figures right.

Notes

[1] The project was named "Understanding Justification of Climate Change Non-action" and was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond P18-0402:1. The survey was conducted in Swedish. The quotes that appear in the essay come from this survey and have been translated by the authors.

[2] The results can be found in Maria Wolrath Söderberg and Nina Wormbs, "Internal Deliberation Defending Climate-Harmful Behavior," *Argumentation: An International Journal on Reasoning* 36 (2022): 203–28, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-021-09562-2.

[3] A round-trip flight from Stockholm to New York creates a climate impact corresponding to 1643 kilograms of CO_2 according to flightemissionmap.org. For Stockholm–Lisbon, the figure is 777 kilograms. At present, the average consumption-based climate impact of a Swedish citizen is ca. 8 tonnes per year. It is possible to reduce emissions with dietary change. Changing from a meat-based to a vegetarian diet can save ca 100-1000 kilograms per year, depending on, for example, how much meat the original diet contained. Elinor

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Hallström, Annika Carlsson-Kanyama, and Pål Börjesson, "Environmental Impact of Dietary Change: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 91 (2015): 1–11, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2014.12.008.

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Nina Wormbs is professor in history of technology at KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. Her research interests include media history, the rhetoric of digitalization, and Arctic climate change, with special interest in the shrinking sea ice and the consequences of the scientific gaze for policy. With Maria Wolrath Söderberg, she has studied how people argue to legitimize inertia in the transition to a sustainable society. Nina was a visiting scholar at the RCC in the spring of 2018 and a Carson Fellow in the fall of 2021.

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