



## Methodological and Ideological Options

## Thou shalt not sell nature: How taboo trade-offs can make us act pro-environmentally, to clear our conscience

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## ABSTRACT

Many nature/natural areas are threatened by economic development and urban expansion. Oftentimes nature is not considered part of the cost/benefit analyses preceding such economic development, and most people find it offensive to price-tag nature. To pit (sacred) nature-values against other monetized values (these are so-called taboo trade-offs) is seen as morally offensive. Non-nature related taboo trade-offs (e.g. between life-saving and money-saving) were found elsewhere to induce moral cleansing — attempts to reaffirm one's own moral position by performing overly moral 'cleansing' behaviour. This study investigated whether trade-offs between nature as sacred value and money as secular induces such moral cleansing in shape of pro-environmental behaviour (PEB). A laboratory experiment measured self-reported (hypothetical) and real donations to an environmental cause, after participants were presented with a taboo or non-taboo trade-off. Taboo trade-offs affected participants' real, but not hypothetical behaviour. Findings support prior evidence that confrontation with certain trade-offs affects people's behaviour, and expand the scope of sacred values to include nature, and moral cleansing-behaviour to PEB.

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## 1. Introduction

Many natural, semi-natural and urban nature areas are threatened to decline and disappear due to economic development and urban expansion. Policy-makers who are responsible for development and expansion plans have to balance economic development with the loss of natural or environmentally significant areas. One planning tool for assessing such trade-offs is cost-benefit analyses (CBAs), which compare the costs and benefits of land development versus preservation of nature, on aspects such as environmental services and goods (such as providing recreational space, air filtering and carbon sequestration, also known as ecosystem services) as well as other socio-economic aspects (e.g. job market, business revenue, land price) (Parks and Gowdy, 2013). However, non-marketable and invisible ecosystem services are often left unaccounted for in land development CBAs (Bräuer, 2003), with the loss of nature areas, its provided services, and environmental degradation as consequences.

One solution to this omission is 'putting a price tag' on ecosystem services or the environment as a whole, so that it is more easily considered in monetary CBAs. In essence, a CBA that incorporates a monetary expression of the ecosystem services explicitly evaluates the trade-off between exploitation and nature preservation. However, consideration of such a trade-off may be unacceptable to people who hold environmental values as sacred. Several strands of psychological literature have investigated the implications of protected values (Baron and Spranca, 1997) or sacred values (Tetlock et al., 2000; Tetlock, 2003) on moral reasoning. Sacred (or protected) values such as a human life, freedom or democracy are absolute and inviolable (Tetlock et al., 2000). Tetlock's research suggests that people will refuse to consider trade-offs of these values out of principle, particularly if they are traded off against a 'secular' value such as money (Fiske and Tetlock, 1997; McGraw and Tetlock, 2005; Oppenheimer and Tetlock, 2008; Tetlock et al., 2000; Tetlock, 2003).

Such a secular-sacred trade-off is termed a 'taboo trade-off'. Although the theory of sacred values was not explicitly developed for environmental decision making, it may offer explanations and important insights for how people respond to environmental trade-offs. It has recently been applied to ecosystem services of a small-scale tropical fishery system (Daw et al., 2015).

Assuming something is either sacredly valued or not, three types of trade-off can be distinguished: routine trade-offs occur when two

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secular values are being considered (e.g. purely economic transactions), taboo trade-offs, as mentioned above, arise when one secular value is being put against one sacred value, and finally tragic trade-offs arise when two sacred values are being traded off against one another (Hanselmann and Tanner, 2008). Both tragic and taboo trade-offs are more emotionally laden than routine trade-offs, but taboo trade-offs have on top of this the particular character of being morally offensive, irrespective of whether we ourselves are considering them (Tetlock et al., 2000) or whether we are judging others who are considering the trade-off (Hanselmann and Tanner, 2008). The normal behavioural response to taboo trade-offs is avoidance or dismissal; as such trade-offs 'simply cannot be made' (Oppenheimer and Tetlock, 2008).

The theories of protected values and taboo trade-offs can provide an explanation of the negative emotional reaction to trading off environment or nature against monetized goods found in many studies using contingent valuation methods to ascertain the value of nature and the environment (see Ritov and Kahneman (1997) for a review). People often respond to such trade-offs with indignity and refuse or rebel against it with nonsensical or zero-replies, based on their sense of morality (Halstead et al., 1992; Iliev et al., 2009). Baron and Leshner (2000) consider that environmental protection and nature are part of a set of protected values, and as such trading them off would induce moral awkwardness. This awkwardness may influence the readiness of people to explicitly recognise and make such trade-offs. It may be easier to 'respectfully' omit nature in a decision process than to trade it off against more tangible gains and losses. However, despite the apparent unease that taboo trade-offs induce, economists insist that they are often quite necessary, due to scarcity of resources and desirability of economic expansion (Tetlock, 2003). Although Tetlock's remark was not aimed specifically at natural resource economics, we suggest that also in this field taboo trade-offs may have an influence on people's behaviour. Resentment of trading off nature against economical gains may work to the detriment of environmental conservation if people react by omitting the environment in a trade-off altogether. But what happens when people cannot avoid making the trade-off?

When people are unable to avoid or reframe a taboo trade-off, they generally respond in one of two ways: exhibiting moral outrage or performing moral cleansing behaviour. Moral outrage often arises when the taboo trade-off is made by others. Bystanders reassure their own moral feeling by responding with outrage against the decision-maker, especially if he or she takes a long time to decide and chooses the 'morally wrong' alternative (Tetlock et al., 2000). However, when people are exposed to the trade-off themselves, or someone close to them experiences it, people also tend to respond with acts of moral cleansing. Moral cleansing is behaviour with which an individual tries to reaffirm his or her own moral position within his social community by acting in extremely moral ways (Brañas-Garza et al., 2013; Kallbekken and Sælen, 2013). Moral cleansing behaviour occurs among people who feel contaminated by a taboo trade-off, and can be induced even by merely thinking about the trade-off for only a short time (mere contemplation effect) (Tetlock et al., 2000). It can result in any kind of 'cleansing' behaviour, from willingness-to-volunteer for a good cause (Tetlock et al., 2000) to donating money to a charity (Sachdeva et al., 2009) and even to the physical act of washing hands (Zhong and Liljenquist, 2006), or, as categorized by West and Zhong (2015), there is restitution cleansing (correcting the wrong), behavioural cleansing (counterbalancing the wrong across distinct dimensions of moral behaviour) and symbolic cleansing (such as washing hands). Particularly behavioural cleansing is of interest to the current study, as it suggests that people easily compensate immoral behaviour in one domain with moral behaviour in another, thus allowing moral cleansing to so-called 'spill over' to another context (see for instance Ho et al. (2015) for such effects on contingent valuation). Note that the process also works the opposite way, when an act of moral nature makes it permissible for a person to thereafter engage in less moral behaviour, this effect is called 'moral licensing' (see Truelove et al., 2014 for a review of both moral cleansing and moral licensing).

This study focuses on moral cleansing since this is the prevalent response among people who are actually experiencing a taboo trade-off or are closely related to the decision-process (Oppenheimer and Tetlock, 2008). We investigate if and how trade-offs between environmental 'sacred' values and monetary ones affect people's moral cleansing behaviour, measured as willingness-to-donate to an environmental cause, as an example of pro-environmental behaviour (PEB). We also measured other established factors that influence environmental (donation) behaviour, in order to identify confounding variables, and to see how much added explanatory power trade-off type could offer. There are many factors that can influence PEB (for example, a recent review of Gifford and Nilsson (2014) found 18 variables that affect it) although few scientific studies specifically investigate pro-environmental donation behaviour. Specifically, we selected factors that were most likely to affect the behaviour of participants in the situation presented to them. These included the traits of social norm conformity, altruism, and ecological/environmental beliefs as well as demographic variables such as age, gender and income (Gifford and Nilsson, 2014).

Prior research into people's willingness-to-pay for environmental services and goods found that what people report they would pay (hypothetical situation) is higher than what they actually pay if the laboratory or field context allows them to pay (real situation), (Loomis, 2011) provided we do not incorporate protest-replies, often blanks or zeros, which make the data difficult to interpret. Overstatements of willingness to pay for some sort of commodity are common in contingent valuation studies (List and Gallet, 2001; Loomis, 2011; Murphy et al., 2005). This phenomenon occurs, among other reasons, because people usually do not know what contextual influences will determine their behaviour in a real situation, when asked in a hypothetical case. Particularly when taboo trade-offs can be subconscious cues (see also Welsh and Ordóñez, 2014), it is difficult for people to estimate how big an influence the trade-off will be on their behaviour. It may thus be that people neglect considering its effect on behaviour when they are cognitively contemplating a reply to a hypothetical case. If this is the case, taboo trade-offs may have a greater effect on real behaviour than on hypothetical willingness-to-pay, with the exception of those participants who use the hypothetical case to rebel against the trade-off.

Two hypotheses were central in this study. Firstly, we tested if participants who were given a taboo trade-off were more likely to exhibit PEB in the shape of donations. Secondly, we tested if taboo trade-offs had a (larger) effect on real donation behaviour, as compared to hypothetical donation behaviour.

## 2. Material & Methods

We investigated the effects of taboo trade-offs on pro-environmental donation behaviour by comparing two conditions; one group of participants decided upon a taboo trade-off, whereas the other group was given a 'tragic' trade-off, where two equally sacred values were pitted against one another (see Fig. 1). Participants were randomly allocated to either of these two groups, given the trade-off, and consequently asked to conduct a contingent-valuation type exercise, where they were to choose if, and if so how much, they would hypothetically donate to a good cause. Subsequently participants were allowed to donate for real, after which the experiment ended.

### 2.1. Participants, Material and Set-up

The sample of participants consisted of people responding to poster-advertisements that were distributed over the Stockholm University campus and Stockholm's public transport-hubs.<sup>3</sup> Participants were

<sup>3</sup> The ad employed as neutral and unrevealing an invitation as possible, i.e. "Would you like to take part in an economic experiment? The Beijer Institute of Ecological Economics is looking for participants for new experiments. This fall semester, we are looking for participants for two experiments. Participants will be rewarded with SEK 200 and it lasts 1 h at most".

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