



# Overcoming our weaker ecological self

Why it is so difficult  
to abandon old habits

By Jeannette Schmid

To combat climate change, we must take decisions and alter our behaviour. But this will not be easy – not least because of our »weaker ecological self«.

Many of us have already made the acquaintance of our »weaker self«, for instance when we need to motivate ourselves to get more physical exercise or want to change our eating habits. This weaker self raises its ugly head especially when significant behavioural changes are required which do demand considerable effort on our part. In this article, which is based on a talk I gave at »Students for Future«, some classic theories of social psychology should help us to track down this stubborn animal: *The Theory of Reasoned Action* of Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein and two of Leon Festinger's theories, namely the *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* and the *Theory of Social Comparison Processes*.

Why does the weaker self, let us call it the »ecological« one, have such an easy time with this topic? Because it takes a lot of effort to behave in a climate-friendly way, since this necessitates a whole number of changes to our behaviour. From mobility (foregoing air travel or big cars) to diet (doing without or at least signifi-

cantly reducing our consumption of meat and fish) to waste separation, switching to green electricity and sustainable products. To change all this, we must change our lives. We do the things we have always done, but not without reason. It is convenient, affordable, familiar...

The *Theory of Reasoned Action* describes how a behavioural intention develops, which can then lead to a change in behaviour. One of the prerequisites is *perceived behavioral control*: »Can I behave this way at all, does the situation allow it?« Perhaps we would like to use an environmentally friendly means of transport to get to work, but public transport is too expensive, operates at the wrong times, is unreliable, or the connection we need does not exist in the first place. The outcome: »I'd like to, but it's just not possible.« The solution lies in changing the situation that prevents this environmentally friendly behaviour by a) Research – perhaps we have overlooked certain possibilities, b) Action – perhaps we can push for better transport connections, c) Rethinking – perhaps we can work from home now and again and do not need to leave the house in the first place, or we could cycle to work.

A second factor in the development of a behavioural intention is the *subjective norm*. What would the people important to me think

### Literature

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about my plans to change my behaviour? Perhaps I don't want to eat meat anymore, but the rest of my family does? That would perhaps mean cooking two different meals more often, and that's expensive. Will I annoy my loved ones with my new eating habits? Simply by striving to follow an environmentally friendly diet I hold up a mirror to others in which they reluctantly recognise themselves. The subjective norm only then becomes an accelerator rather than an obstacle when more and more of the people around me change their behaviour.

### Rewards as incentives

The third factor is the *attitude towards the behaviour*. Would I benefit if I changed my behaviour, and what harm could I expect if I don't change it? If I avoid waste, the dustbin is emptier. The prospect of this »reward« has little impact. And if I don't do it, will the Atlantic come to visit me tomorrow and deposit its plastic waste on my kitchen floor? Of course not. To acquire a positive attitude towards a type of behaviour which is environmentally friendly, rewards must be created: Waste separation as the starting point for creative upcycling or repair skills, a meat-free diet is an invitation to produce sophisticated yet uncomplicated dishes.

### Behavioural changes are tender plants

We will next turn our attention to the *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Let us assume that we are on the right track: We have already changed some of our behaviour patterns (e.g. waste separation, green electricity, no more meat), but

plenty of others still remain that do not quite fit in with our aspired self-image of an environmentally aware individual. However, if our behaviour does not mirror our attitude, if they jar with each other in some way (if there is dissonance), this is experienced as unpleasant. One solution could be to align our remaining behaviour patterns with ecological criteria. That means hard work. We can try a justification: »Okay, I'll fly, but I'll pay an eco-fee for it, then it's not so bad, and I don't fly that often anyway.« The worst method of reducing dissonance for climate goals lies in a change in attitude: »After all, it's still questionable whether things are really going to get that bad with climate change...«. New behaviour patterns are tender plants, always in danger of being abandoned. One »false step« can result in the abandonment of the purpose. However, we should forgive ourselves such aberrations, provided we do not slacken our efforts.

There is also an aspect of cognitive dissonance that works in our favour. The longer we have persevered with a change in our behaviour and the more sacrifices we have made for it, the more difficult it becomes to abandon it again. We are bound by our investment.

### We like to compare ourselves downwards

The theory of cognitive dissonance already brings us to the question: What does my behaviour say about me? How »good« am I, compared others? At first sight, there is nothing wrong with this question, but there is a downside. In order for the comparison to turn out



positive for us, we look for people who are similar to us but come off slightly worse. If need be, we even make sure that they come off worse. This is what is meant by the *Theory of Social Comparison Processes*. It is a comparison »downwards.« And since we are not the only ones who act in this way, it has tangible consequences.

Even if we have perhaps changed some of our ecological behaviour patterns, »weak points« still remain. This is where we are vulnerable. And that is exactly where others may try to declare their moral superiority because – in contrast to us – they have already given up air travel, cars and non-ecological products. On the other hand, they possibly still eat loads of meat and fish and do not bother to avoid waste or save energy. Experiencing put-downs and reproaches vastly increases cognitive dissonance and thus increases the risk that our first attempts at climate-friendly behaviour are abandoned again. Pointing fingers at others does not help – on the contrary: It is even counterproductive.

In closing, a little encouragement: We often hear that individuals are powerless when state or society fail to act. However, this does not take into account the immense impact of the example. Each person who successfully changes behaviour prompts others to follow suit. The individual example is powerful. And people can do a lot for each other, encourage each other, exchange ideas on how to implement things, start playing a politically active role. ●



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