

The integration of cross-disciplinary research in neuroscience and social science – a methodological case study on economic policies and the neuroscience of agency, (INSOSCI)

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In recent times, many governments in the Western world have invited experts from the neurosciences, psychology and social sciences to advise them on public policies. The motivation lies in the accumulating research on failures of rational behaviour in many contexts, such as financial markets, consumption habits or addiction. The idea is to use these insights in order to ‘nudge’ people into adopting better behaviour in their own interest. However, these approaches suffer from many deficiencies so far, and they stay in conflict with certain basic notions of rights and individual freedom in modern societies. One difficulty lies in the lack of an integrating conceptual framework, as many scientific disciplines are involved. This is especially challenging for policy design, since the different disciplines often refer to many different levels of possible intervention points, such as neuronal or hormonal mechanisms, individual choices and information, or institutional design. This project tackles these issues and chooses one especially salient and politically important issue domain, namely financial markets. In popular conceptions, many dysfunctional phenomena in financial markets relate to an alleged clash between emotions and rationality. For economists, notions such as that ‘bankers’ are greedy’ may not fit into their theoretical design, but nevertheless psychology provides perspectives on this. So, how one can put those different disciplines into one framework would certainly improve the quality of the scientific foundations of public policy. Achieving such a framework is a task for modern analytical and theoretical philosophy and the philosophy of science. Therefore, in this project philosophers and experts from the different disciplines collaborate in creating such a framework and in drawing up a map of this complex field in order to identify intervention points and evaluate alternative intervention designs.