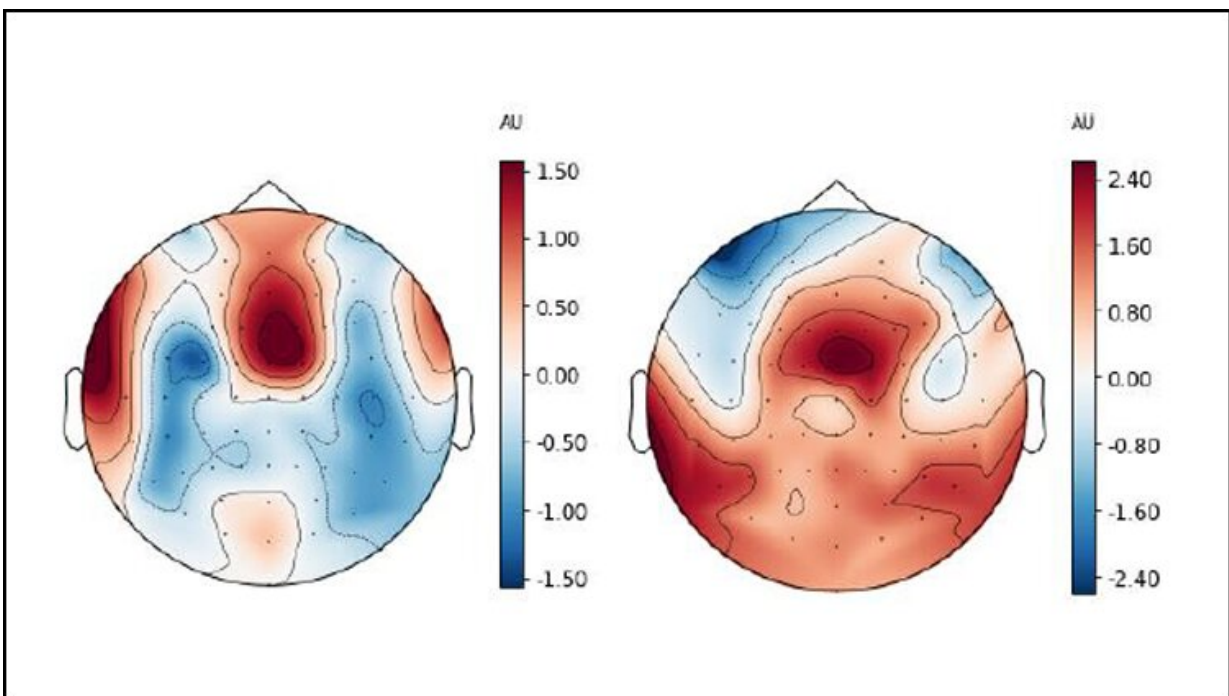


# To cheat or not to cheat? Cognitive control can drive cheaters to be honest and honest people to cheat

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Topoplots of the first half second of the Spot the difference task (left) and the last 250 ms of the Stroop task (right) in the theta band. Credit: Speer et al., JNeurosci 2021

The ability of cognitive control allows humans to override the brain's impulses, like focusing on one person in the crowd and ignoring

distractions. It also plays a role in making moral decisions. But does cognitive control override a moral impulse to be honest, or to be dishonest? It depends on a person's moral default, according to new research published in *JNeurosci*.

Speer et al. used EEG to find the activity pattern of cognitive control and compare it to the [brain](#) activity of participants during a cheating task. Participants played spot-the-difference and won a reward when they reported finding three differences. But only some pairs of images actually contained three differences, encouraging the participants to cheat.

The moral default of the participants varied: some people chose to cheat a few times, while others only told the truth a few times. As participants decided whether or not to cheat, the activity of theta brainwaves strengthened—an activity pattern representative of cognitive control.

Stronger theta activity meant participants were more likely to go against their moral default: cheaters were more likely to be honest, and honest people were more likely to cheat.

**More information:** Cognitive Control Promotes either Honesty or Dishonesty, Depending on One's Moral Default, *JNeurosci* (2021). [DOI: 10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0666-21.2021](https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0666-21.2021)

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