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THE RATIONALITIES OF EMOTION¹

abstract

I argue that emotions are not only rational in-themselves, strictly speaking, but they are also instrumentally rational, epistemically rational, and evaluatively rational. I begin with a discussion of what it means for emotions to be rational or irrational in-themselves, which includes the derivation of a criterion for the ontological rationality of emotions (COR^e): For emotion or an emotion there exists some normative standard that is given by what emotion or an emotion is against which our emotional responses can be judged or evaluated in virtue of the fact that our emotions manifest our rationality. I conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of this account.

keywords

emotions, rationality, irrationality, knowledge, epistemology

1. Introduction According to one entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word ‘rational’ is to be understood as a noun that refers to the following:

The rational part of the human mind; the power or faculty of reason; that which is rational or reasonable; a conjunction that expresses a reason for a statement; a rational being; *spec.* a human being, as opposed to an animal².

A second entry defines the word ‘rational’ as an adjective or adverb, suggesting the following of those things that are rational:

Having the faculty of reasoning; endowed with reason. Esp. in rational being, rational creature, rational soul, etc.; that uses, or is capable of using, the faculty of reasoning; having sound judgement; (in extended use) sensible, sane, lucid. Also: characterized by reasoning, as opposed to emotion, intuition, etc.; of or relating to reason or reasoning; that exists only in the mind; having no actual physical presence; based on or derived from reason or reasoning, esp. as opposed to emotion, intuition, instinct, etc.; involving or characterized by any of various methods of analysis or planning based on the calculation of a projected result; designating such a method; in accordance with reason; reasonable, sensible; not foolish, absurd, or extreme; of a conjunction: that expresses a reason for a statement; and in a rational manner; rationally³.

The first entry suggests that what is rational is closely associated with the faculty of reasoning, and may be applicable only to human beings as a species. The second entry adds to the first

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2 “Rational, n.1.” OED Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/270902?rskey=7eJTU9&result=1> (accessed December 16, 2015).

3 “Rational, adj. and adv.” OED Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158502?rskey=7eJTU9&result=3> (accessed December 16, 2015).

by indicating a relationship between what is rational and what is a sound judgment, sensible, sane, lucid, not foolish, not absurd, and not extreme, while also illustrating the highly mental or intellectual nature of what is rational by contrasting it with what is physical, emotion, intuition, and instinct. Furthermore, the first entry's emphasis on human beings, along with the second entry's contrast between what is rational and what is physical, emotion, intuition, and instinct imply that both human infants, some people with disabilities, and non-human animals lack the capacity to be rational⁴. Finally, both entries suggest a close relationship between the notion of rationality and reasons as justification for holding beliefs or claims of knowledge.

Consistent with the above account of what is rational, some philosophers have argued that it makes no sense to speak of emotions as being rational *in-themselves*, i.e., that *emotions qua emotion* or *qua emotion-types* are neither rational nor irrational (Rorty 1985; Prinz 1994)⁵. Rorty's observation makes two important points (Rorty 1985: 351): First, it suggests that emotions qua emotion or qua emotion-types are neither rational nor irrational in-themselves. Second, it suggests that considerations about the rationality of emotions themselves are considerations about the rationality of an individual in light of the fact that an individual is having an emotional experience. It is the rationality of the individual that is under consideration and not, strictly speaking, the rationality of emotions.

I accept the second point, but argue in §2 that emotions *are* at times rational and at times irrational in-themselves, qua emotion or emotion-types, and in §6 I argue that our emotional responses are rational in that they rely on a faculty of reasoning; that they may be analogous to sound judgments; that they may be reasonable, sensible, sane, lucid; not foolish, absurd, or extreme; that they are types of reasoning; that they are based on or derived from reason or reasoning; that they are in accordance with some kind of reason; that they involve some method of analysis or planning based on the calculation of projected results; that they may express reasons for statements; that they can be experienced in a rational manner; and that they may be analogous to reasons as justifications for holding beliefs or knowing. In doing so, I deny that emotions are opposed to reason, that what is rational exists only in the mind and has no physical presence, and I open the door to a conceptual space that allows us to understand infants, some people with disabilities (who are thought of as otherwise), and non-human emotional animals as being rational and capable of knowing.

When I speak of the *rationality* of emotions, I am referring to a *capacity* for being at times rational and at times irrational. When we speak of the rationality of an individual in respect to their emotional experiences—for example, when we judge one's anger to be rational or irrational—we are speaking of the individual's capacity to reason *in virtue* of their emotional experiences. Furthermore, RATIONAL is a comparative concept. To say that something is "rational" only makes sense if there is some comparative sense in which we can say that *that* thing is irrational and *vice versa*. RATIONAL is also a normative concept⁶. To speak of an individual's "rationality" or the "rationality of emotions" is to suggest that there is at least some norm against which an individual's rationality can be evaluated as being either rational or irrational. This normative standard is typically cashed-out in positive terms as defining what is rational, and what is irrational is typically placed in opposition to this normative standard.

2. The Criterion for the Ontological Rationality of Emotions (COR^e)

⁴ John Deigh (1994) applies a similar line of reasoning in his analysis of cognitive theories of emotion.

⁵ Two relevant distinctions ought to be made here: 1) a distinction between types of emotion *de re* and *de dicto*, and 2) a distinction between types of emotion *de re/de dicto* and emotion as a *genus*. By 'emotion-types' I mean types of emotion *de re* rather than *de dicto*, which are to be distinguished from emotion as a *genus*.

⁶ A term put in all caps indicates a reference to a concept.

Finally, to say that emotions themselves are at times rational and at times irrational is not to deny that the individual is the one who is being rational or irrational in having an emotional experience. Theoretical discussions about what emotions are do not hold that emotions ought to be understood as entities in their own right, as if they existed independently of our (or any emoter's) mental or physiological capacities, despite the way that some theorists speak of emotions. Theories of emotion instead presuppose that emotions are essentially aspects of such mental or physiological capacities. When theorists speak of emotions, they are speaking of aspects of an individual. Thus to speak of the rationality of emotions in-themselves is to say that there exists some normative standard—given by what emotion or an emotion is—by which our emotional responses can be judged or evaluated in light of the fact that they manifest our rationality. If there are such standards for emotions, then emotions qua emotion or qua emotion-types are at times rational and at times irrational. The antecedent of this conditional expresses what I refer to as the *criterion for the ontological rationality of emotions* (COR^e): For *emotion* or *an emotion* there exists some normative standard that is given by what emotion or an emotion is against which our emotional responses can be judged or evaluated in virtue of the fact that our emotions manifest our rationality, i.e., the capacity for being both rational and irrational.

I argue in the remainder of this paper that the COR^e can be fulfilled. In doing so, I aim to explain why emotional creatures are at times rational and at times irrational in light of their emotional experiences—the rationality of emotions qua emotion or qua emotion-types. I begin by differentiating concerns regarding the rationality of emotions qua emotion from other concerns involving emotions and judgments of rationality. More specifically, I differentiate concerns regarding the rationality of emotions qua emotion or qua emotion-types from concerns regarding the instrumental rationality, the epistemic rationality, and the evaluative rationality of emotions⁷. I conclude with a discussion of how emotions qua emotion or qua emotion-types fulfill the COR^e, and I draw out the implications of this conclusion on the following: 1) our understanding of the possibility of human infants, some people with disabilities (who might be thought of as otherwise), and emotional animals as being rational and bearers of knowledge, 2) a way to adjudicate between internalistic, evidentialist and externalistic, reliabilist accounts of justification for knowledge, and 3) our understanding of the place of the physical in regard to what is rational and how something is known.

3. The Instrumental Rationality of Emotions

The rationality of emotions has been widely addressed by philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and economists. We can understand many of these concerns to be about the *instrumental rationality of emotions*—about the role emotions play in rational decision-making rather than the rationality of emotions in-themselves. To illustrate this point, consider Tversky and Griffin's (1994) study of assessments of well-being based on a model of choice compared to a model of judgment. Tversky and Griffin found that assessments of well-being based on a model of choice often diverge from assessments of well-being based on a model of judgment. In their study, Tversky and Griffin gave students a scenario with two options: (A) a job paying \$35,000, where equally qualified workers would receive \$38,000, and (B) a job paying \$33,000, where equally qualified workers would receive \$30,000. Approximately half of the students surveyed were asked which job they would *choose* and the other half were asked at which job they would be *happier*. Eighty-four percent (84%) of the students who were asked

⁷ Note that this is not an exhaustive list of the ways in which emotions can be understood to be rational or irrational (e.g., see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) for a separate although overlapping discussion about the rationality or appropriateness of emotions).

the first question chose option (A), the job that offered the higher salary compared to the other option but also gave an even higher salary to other equally qualified employees. Sixty-two percent (62%) of the students who were asked the second question expected that they would be happier with option (B), the job that offered the comparatively lower salary but also gave an even lower salary to equally qualified employees.

For our discussion here, we can understand assessments of well-being based on judgments of satisfaction or happiness as *emotion-based judgments* and we can understand assessments of well-being based on choices as *utility-based judgments*⁸. Given this, one can suggest that, in consideration of the results provided by Tversky and Griffin, at least some of these emotion-based judgments involve “irrational” emotions. One may argue that given a within-subject design, emotion-based judgments of well-being would be deemed rational if the students who chose option (A) also determined that they would be happier with option (A). The emotion-based judgments of students who would choose divergent responses or who would choose option (B) for both options would be deemed irrational since in both cases the standard for being rational would typically be set by the standard of rationality for utility-based judgments (which is typically taken as utility maximization cashed out in terms of monetary values). Therefore, emotions would be taken as irrational either because the judgments that follow from them inconsistently reflect the rational conclusions of rational utility-based judgments or because they never reflect the rational conclusions of rational utility-based judgments. There are two points I want to make in response to this kind of argument; both of my points suggest that one may be making a category mistake when putting forth arguments like the above. First, one may be confounding two separate rational decision-making processes. Emotion-based judgments may have their own standard of rationality. So it may be problematic to contrast emotion-based judgments with utility-based judgments, and then hold rational utility-based judgments as the standard for rational emotion-based judgments. Second, even if we grant that emotion-based judgments are always irrational to the extent that they fail to consistently reflect the same outcomes given by rational utility-based judgments, this does not entail that emotions are themselves always irrational. Concerns regarding the rationality of emotion-based judgments are *not* the same as concerns regarding the rationality of emotions themselves. Concerns regarding the rationality of emotion-based judgments are concerns about the instrumental role emotions play in rational decision-making, i.e., they are concerns about the *instrumental rationality of emotions*⁹.

Emotions can also be said to be rational or irrational in virtue of what Calhoun refers to as ‘epistemic subjectivity’, which presupposes a counterpart notion of epistemic objectivity (Calhoun 2004). As Calhoun notes, characterizing emotions as epistemically subjective casts them as being unreliable in terms of either failing to accurately reflect objective facts about the world or as being entirely incapable of reflecting any kind of objective fact about the world (Calhoun 2004, 108-109). This is because if we understand emotions to be epistemically subjective, and thus irrational in this sense, then emotions must meet a standard of epistemic objectivity in order to be regarded as rational. If along with cognitive theorists of emotion we grant that emotions are types of beliefs or judgments, it is generally accepted that epistemic objectivity requires emotions to be true and well warranted in order for emotions to be

4. The Epistemic Rationality of Emotions

⁸ Some might argue that this distinction may be significantly related to dual-process models of moral judgment. See Greene (2007). Also see Green (2009) for discussions regarding controversies over dual-process models of moral decision-making.

⁹ Also see Pollock’s (2006) account of rational decision-making, especially the role of state-likings; however, one ought to note that it is not clear how state-likings are related to emotions on Pollock’s account.

regarded as rational. In other words, like beliefs, the *ideal* of epistemic objectivity requires emotions to be forms of knowledge in order to be regarded as rational just as the ideal of epistemic objectivity requires beliefs to be forms of knowledge in order for beliefs to be regarded as rational¹⁰.

Framed within what has been characterized as traditional noncognitive theories of emotion—what Deigh referred to as “feeling-centered” theories, which take emotions to be simple impressions that lack any representational content (Deigh 1994: 825)—emotions are simple feelings. In light of this, emotions would lack any kind of meaning or propositional content, and if rational assessment requires the object of assessment to be capable of conveying some meaning or propositional content that is to be assessed, then emotions would be beyond the purview of any rational assessment. They could never be rational or irrational.

These criticisms regarding the epistemic subjectivity of emotions—in virtue of relying on false or unjustified beliefs, or being incapable of representing any cognitive content—are about the *epistemic rationality of emotions*.

5. The Evaluative Rationality of Emotions

Emotions are at times rational and at times irrational in accordance with the biographical subjectivity of emotions, which refers to the fact that emotions reflect personal histories and values (Calhoun 2004: 113). The significant idea here is that emotions reflect a personal point of view. Calhoun notes that this notion of biographical subjectivity is often used to undercut the epistemic significance of emotions (Calhoun 2004: 108-109)¹¹. To do so, biographical subjectivity is contrasted with a notion of biographical objectivity, and so what is rational, as arriving at truths from a biographically objective perspective¹². From a biographically objective perspective, our view of the world is to be purified from our personal biases—from our personal histories and values.

Calhoun argues that the biographical subjectivity/objectivity of emotions may be distinguished from their epistemic rationality (epistemic objectivity/subjectivity) (Calhoun 2004: 115). Given this difference, we can understand the rationality of emotions in a sense that is distinct from concerns regarding the epistemic rationality of emotions. Judgments about the rationality of emotions when placed only against the background distinction between biographical objectivity and biographical subjectivity may be judgments about whether or not one’s emotional responses from a biographically subjective viewpoint are consistent with the emotional responses from one’s biographically objective viewpoint. In this sense, one would hold one’s emotional response from the biographically objective viewpoint to set the standard for what counts as a rational response. In some cases, however, the standard for a rational response may be upheld by the biographically subjective viewpoint. For example, feelings of love, attachment, and jealousy, may all be rational *only* from a biographically subjective viewpoint (making such emotional responses irrational from a biographically objective viewpoint). Such cases of rationality or irrationality, which take into consideration the biographically subjective and biographically objective viewpoints as the backdrop against which our emotional responses ought to be judged as being rational or irrational, are cases regarding the *evaluative rationality of emotions*.

¹⁰ Note that what is understood to be ‘knowledge’, within the context of the notion of epistemic rationality, is demarcated by the traditional criteria of knowledge as justified, true belief.

¹¹ This notion of biographical subjectivity involves what Helm would refer to as a commitment to import (Helm 2010: 310).

¹² The notions of a biographically objective viewpoint and a biographically subjective viewpoint can be understood as being respectively synonymous with Parfit’s notions of an ‘impartial point of view’ and a ‘personal point of view’ (Parfit 2013: 40-41, 133).

A fourth way of understanding the rationality of emotions is to understand emotions as *superordinate inference rules*. Emotions as superordinate inference rules offers a way of understanding the rationality of emotions that characterizes emotions to be arbiters of rationality rather than objects of rational assessment. Emotion-types, along with token experiences of these types, are rational *qua emotion* as a category of rational operations that implement a more general *category-level superordinate inference rule* (at the level of emotion as a *genus*). Token experiences of emotion-types are rational or irrational in-themselves—*qua the type of emotion that they are*—in virtue of the reliable operation of *type-level superordinate inference rules* (at the level of *species* of emotion).

In regard to exactly what emotion is as a category-level superordinate inference rule (e.g., emotion) or exactly what an emotion as a type-level superordinate inference rule is (e.g., as fear, anger, joy, etc.), my answer is that these are some of the questions that are currently under investigation by emotion theorists and researchers across disciplines; however, whatever emotion or an emotion is (including concerns about its status as an objective kind or a subjective kind)¹³, what constitutes its essential nature as a category-level or type-level superordinate inference rule is that which is intended by speakers of some language, especially ordinary or natural languages, to be tracked by or reflected by the intentional content of their use of relevant emotion term(s), i.e., the intentionality of emotion or an emotion-type¹⁴. This understanding of what an emotion or emotion is as a super-ordinate inference rule is consistent with evolutionary psychological theories of emotions as superordinate programs (Cosmides and Tooby 2000), with basic emotion theories of emotions as affect programs (Ekman and Cordaro 2011), with component process theories of emotions as emergent processes (Scherer 2009), and with psychological constructionist theories of emotions as emotional meta-experiences (Russell 2008) or emotional episodes (Barrett et al. 2015)¹⁵. Prinz also suggests something similar with his notion of calibration files, although Prinz identifies calibration files as aspects of the initiation pathways of emotion rather than as aspects of emotion or the emotion system (Prinz 2004: 235-238).

Emotions as superordinate inference rules are thus origins of rationality. In this respect, the rationality or irrationality of token experiences of emotion can only be appropriately assessed in terms of the normative conditions that emotion or an emotion as a superordinate inference rule provides. Emotion or an emotion as a superordinate inference rule runs outside considerations of traditional or standard logical systems that dictate how assessments of warrant, rational thoughts, and rational judgments are to be evaluated. Emotion or an emotion as a superordinate inference rule is instead on par with what is typically regarded as that which functions to produce rational thought and judgment in accordance with logical rules of inference.

6. The Rationality of Emotions Qua Emotion or Emotion-Types as Superordinate Inference Rules

¹³ See Mun (2016) for a more detailed discussion on objective kinds and subjective kinds.

¹⁴ One might differentiate the intention that is to be tracked by or reflected by the intentional content of one's use of an emotion term from the intentionality of an emotion. My response to this distinction is that it requires further thought and research.

¹⁵ Note that emotions as superordinate inference rules may be implied by Hochschild's (2012) feeling rules, but Hochschild's feeling rules go beyond the limits of what emotions as superordinate inference rules are intended to capture. For example, corporate mandates on how their employees ought to emotionally interact with customers or clients are parasitic on emotions as superordinate inference rules rather than being superordinate inference rules of emotion. Also note that we can understand D'Arms and Jacobson's (2000) notion of the fittingness of emotions to presuppose a notion of emotions as superordinate inference rules. In order for an emotional response to be understood as fitting we must first presuppose that emotions are such things that can be fitting. D'Arms and Jacobson explain this by suggesting that our emotional responses have certain evaluative features (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000: 72). I agree, but I add here that what determines which evaluative features are the relevant evaluative features for a particular emotional response is determined by an understanding of emotions as superordinate inference rules.

Furthermore, if we consider the fact that the epistemic rationality of emotions depends on the truth of or the justification for experiencing a particular emotion, as well as what makes it possible for an emotion to be true or justified, then understanding emotions as superordinate inference rules is that which allows for the possibility of the epistemic rationality of emotions. If we understand the epistemic status of token emotions in terms of an internalistic, evidentialist account of warrant (or justification), then understanding emotions as superordinate inference rules allows one to recognize one's evidence as *warranting* (or as *justificatory*) evidence, i.e., they allow one to recognize one's evidence as *evidence* or as *reasons that warrant one's emotional response*. In this sense, superordinate inference rules can be understood as capacities that allow us to make such recognitions.

It should also be noted that this account of emotions as superordinate inference rules does not require one to posit that one must be aware of or is able to report the superordinate inference rule that allows one to recognize what counts as evidence or reasons for their emotional experience. Thus the notion of emotion or emotion-types as superordinate inference rules suggests that an internalistic, evidentialist justification of warranted emotions ultimately depends on a reliabilist meta-justification¹⁶.

Given all of the foregoing, we can conclude that understanding emotions as superordinate inference rules allows us to understand emotions as ways of making sense of our phenomenal experiences of one's self, others, and the world. Emotions are ways of *sense-making*, and as such, provide a mode of understanding and knowing one's self, others, and the world we inhabit. I refer to this principle as *the fundamental epistemic principle of emotion (K^e)*: Emotions qua emotion or emotion-types as superordinate inference rules are modes of sense-making, and as such emotions can be vehicles of knowledge.

7. Conclusion To say that emotions qua emotion or qua emotion-types as superordinate inference rules are rational or irrational is to say that there is some normative standard that is given by what emotions are as a genus or a species (regardless of their status as an objective kind or subjective kind), against which our emotional responses are assessed or evaluated as being either rational or irrational. Thus the identification of such standards would allow us to conclude that emotions are at times rational and at times irrational—not only in terms of their instrumental rationality, epistemic rationality, and evaluative rationality, but also in-themselves, qua emotion or qua emotion-types as superordinate inference rules. Thus emotions as superordinate inference rules fulfill the COR^e. The COR^e was introduced in section §1, and states that for *emotion* or *an emotion* there exists some normative standard that is given by what emotion or an emotion is against which our emotional responses can be judged or evaluated in virtue of the fact that our emotions manifest our rationality. It is the fulfillment of this criterion regarding the ontological rationality of emotions that allows us to conclude that emotions are at times rational and at times irrational qua emotion or qua emotion-types. Emotions as superordinate inference rules fulfill this criterion.

Given that emotions as superordinate inference rules grounds the rationality of emotions qua emotion or qua emotion-types, this understanding of what emotions are challenges us to reconsider the way in which emotions are often placed in opposition to what is rational. If emotions can be intrinsically rational, and by this we mean that our emotional responses can be rational in-themselves, then there must be a conceptual space of rationality that out-runs

¹⁶ This conclusion may be taken as tracking the underlying distinction between Sosa's (2009) notions of animal and reflective knowledge, as well as presupposing a basic notion of knowledge as a state of mind. See Williamson (1995).

the conceptual space in which we place that which is rational in opposition to our emotions¹⁷. This conclusion allows us to understand human infants, some people with disabilities, and non-human emotional animals as being rational, although this way of being rational may be significantly different from other ways in which “normal” adult human beings may be rational¹⁸. This conclusion also allows for such individuals to be bearers of knowledge. From an internalist perspective on justification, human infants, some people with disabilities, and non-human emotional animals may be denied the epistemic status of knowers because their emotional responses fail to be justified by beliefs or thoughts that can be accessed or reported in accordance with internalistic, evidentialist requirements. I reject this claim, and argue from an externalistic, reliabilist perspective that, at minimum, their emotional responses can garner them the status of knowers despite their failure or inability to access or report their reasons or evidence that justify or warrant their emotional responses. Furthermore, emotions as superordinate inference rules suggest that an internalistic, evidentialist account of emotional knowledge, wherein one is able to access or report the reasons for their emotional responses, may ultimately depend on an externalistic, reliabilist justification of emotion or emotion-types as superordinate inference rules¹⁹. Given this, and the assumption that emotions necessarily have physical components, it also follows that our rationality can be physically manifested and so knowledge can have a physical form.

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17 One might argue that Baker’s (2008) notion of friendship trust and the kind of rationality captured by Fantl and McGrath’s (2008) cases of pragmatic justification share this conceptual space with emotions.

18 See Sosa (2009) distinction between animal and reflective knowledge.

19 One might run such an argument along the lines of Cohen’s (2002) argument for animal knowledge.

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