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*Klaus Scherer*

## Emotions can be rational

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**I maintain that** a strict separation and juxtaposition of ratio and passion, or of cognition and affect, has severely impeded progress in theory and research in the social and behavioral sciences and may have also been detrimental to work in philosophy. More specifically, in this note I will attempt to show that emotion can be considered rational, at least in some of the commonly accepted meanings of the word. This includes some of the usages of the concept of ratio in philosophy, particularly in the sense of practical reason (Aristotle, Kant). I will discuss the rationality of emotions by focusing on three possible meanings of rational: (1) rational in the sense of functional, (2) rational in the sense of intellectual, and (3) rational in the sense of reasonable.

### **Rational in the sense of functional**

In many uses of the term rational, an optimal means-end relationship is implied. This is the case, for example, in Aristotle's notion of practical reason defined as the faculty with which we perceive (a) what means are available to us in order to achieve a goal, (b) which among these means are the most efficient, and/or the most appropriate, and (c) how to employ these means in actual conduct (after Angeles, 1981). The choice of appropriate means to reach specific ends or goals is emphasized in Max Weber's concept of "Zweckrationalität". While in both of these cases a cognitive, volitional choice of means to reach an end seems to be implied, one is tempted to draw a parallel to the notion of functionality in

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biological adaptation. While it is possible to argue vigorously about the differences between rational and functional, I have little doubt that many of those who regard emotional behavior as irrational are also convinced that the emotions are dysfunctional. This assumption is at the root of the view that emotions disrupt or disorganize behavior. I have proposed elsewhere (Scherer, 1982, 1984) that far from being dysfunctional, the emotion system is actually one of the most efficient phylogenetically evolved mechanisms for adaptation in higher organisms. More specifically, I have argued that it was the development of emotion that freed organisms from rigid stimulus control thus providing for a highly flexible behavioral repertoire and, ultimately, "freedom of the will", if that does indeed exist. The various components of the emotion process have different functions (for details see Scherer, 1984): evaluation (the rapid processing of the significance of environmental events for the organism, involving a number of cortical and subcortical structures and both innate and learned detection mechanisms), physiological arousal (serving to energize and mobilize the organism for appropriate adaptive reaction), expression (serving to display the emotional state to conspecifics for a variety of strategic and interactional purposes), behavior tendencies (rapid availability of preparatory action tendencies with a latency to choose the appropriate action), and subjective feeling (serving as an internal signal to focus on and monitor relationships between organism and environment). Highlighting the adaptive functions of emotions in this way, one can claim that emotional reactions are rational, in the sense of *Zweckrationalität*, if the goal of adaptation and survival is considered primary.

### **Rational in the sense of intellectual**

Frequently, rational is used in the sense of cognitive and/or intellectual. While neither of these terms is well-defined in psychology, it seems to be implied that some form of cortical processing as well as structures of logical argument are involved. It should be noted, however, that in medieval philosophy *ratio* (reason, "Vernunft") was often distinguished from *intellectus* (intelligence, "Verstand"). According to this view, *ratio* leads one to practical action and to a common sense view of the world and exists prior to the development or activity of human intelligence, whereas

intellectus is the foundation for theorizing, speculating, abstracting, inferring and contemplating (Angeles, 1981). Neither practical action nor a common sense view of the world seems to necessarily require a strictly logical calculus. But even if we take rational in the sense of analytically cognitive, intellectual, it cannot be claimed that the emotion process is devoid of this kind of activity. I have tried to show elsewhere that the differentiation of the many emotional states can be explained by a sequence of "stimulus evaluation checks", many of which are highly cognitive and inferential in nature (Scherer, 1981, 1984). The fact that these inference and evaluation processes have affective consequences is based on the nature of the evaluational criteria employed, not on the properties of inference. Thus, any attempt to separate "hot" and "cold" cognitions requires a specification of content differences independent of the form of processing. This may prove to be a difficult if not impossible exercise.

If one insists on separating emotion and reason one might want to argue that the cognitive precursors of feeling states are not part of the emotion. In this way, one would treat cognitive processes as antecedents, and emotional symptoms including feeling as consequences. In this case, however, the question of the rationality of emotions becomes meaningless since rational can only be the description of a process, not of a consequent state. I suggest to treat cognitive evaluation and inference as part of the emotion process. These processes do not have to be logical in the sense of formal logic in order to be rational. I prefer to use rational in the sense of reasonable, as described under (3) to distinguish between rational and irrational antecedent processing of environmental stimulation.

There is a final aspect to be considered here and that is the indubitable fact that emotional reactions often interfere with the adequacy of intellectual processes (see Dörner, Reither and Stäudel, 1983). However, this is also the case with many other states of organisms including fatigue, hunger, or other physiological states. Furthermore, in many cases it is not the process that is affected but the premises and the outcomes. For example, the word "rationalize" stands, quite aptly, for processes that seem logical and maybe are logical but where there can be doubt concerning the truth or appropriateness of the underlying presumptions or the evaluative criteria used. The latter, however, cannot be constituted by an examination of the logical process used in deriving a conclusion but only by intersubjective consensus (see next section).

**Rational in the sense of reasonable**

In terms of common sense understanding, rational is most often used in the sense of reasonable, explainable, sensible, intelligible. If an observer cannot empathize with the "rationale", the reasons underlying a particular piece of behavior, he or she will consider that behavior irrational. Similarly, many philosophers (e.g. Kant, Peirce) have proposed a discursive notion of reason where the intersubjective consensus is the defining criterion to accept an opinion, norm, or behavior as conforming to reason. Reason specifies the condition on the basis of which statements can be accepted as true (Anacker, 1974), and these must be defined by the consensus of a free community of "reasoning individuals".

Thus, it depends on the attribution of others whether emotional reactions and/or their strength seem justified or reasonable in terms of the observed antecedent events. In this sense, emotion can be rational or irrational, depending on a consensus in terms of whether the "emoter's" evaluation of the eliciting situation and the nature of the response seem justified in the sense of a normative definition of emotional reactivity or not. In the framework of the sequence model of emotional differentiation which I have proposed (Scherer, 1981, 1984), there presumably are social conventions in terms of which outcomes of the stimulus evaluation check sequence are considered appropriate under specific circumstances. Deviations from these appropriate outcomes may occur because of misperception of the situational cues (i.e. the perceived intention of other actors) or misevaluation of one's own action potential (e.g. overestimation of one's power). Viewed in this way, it can be considered irrational if an emotion that seems to be required by a particular constellation of eliciting factors does not occur (cf. Aristotle's convincing demonstration of the need to become angry when there is reason to be angry; *Ethica Nicomachea* p. 996 in McKeon, 1941). Thus, the fact that there are attribution errors in evaluating the significance of situational events which lead to emotions that are considered unreasonable by observers does not mean that emotions are generally irrational.

In conclusion, one either has to separate cognitive processes of evaluation and inference from emotional consequences such as arousal and feeling, in which case the rationality of emotions does not arise as an issue. Or, if one includes cognitive processes in the concept of emotion, emotions must be considered to be rational, at

least some of the time, in the three senses of the term discussed above.

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