

Emotions and practical rationality: A comparison of reactive and instrumental theories

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Abstract The chapter contrasts two classes of mechanistic emotion theories—reactive and instrumental ones—with a particular focus on how they account for the practical irrationality typically ascribed to emotions. After demarcating practical rationality from theoretical rationality, I distinguish between rationality in the process-sense and the output-sense as well as between direct and indirect paths through which emotions are supposed to influence behavior. Then I describe the mechanisms for emotion causation put forward by the two classes of theories: a stimulus-driven mechanism in reactive theories and a goal-directed mechanism in instrumental theories. Finally, I compare the account of the irrationality of emotions provided by reactive and instrumental theories. I do this separately for the direct and indirect pathways. Regarding the direct pathway, the stimulus-driven mechanism in reactive theories is irrational in the process-sense, but can on occasion yield a rational output. The goal-directed mechanism in instrumental theories is rational in the process-sense, but can still produce an irrational output. Regarding the indirect pathway, reactive theories consider the following biases: emotions as a switch from goal-directed to stimulus-driven processes, incidental emotions, and integral emotions. Instrumental theories propose an alternative goal-directed explanation for each of these presumed biases that is more parsimonious because it does not require postulating the moderating or mediating role of emotions.