

The role of emotions in reasoning & decision-making

Traditionally, decision-making has been construed as a purely cognitive process. Recent psychological work has questioned views of this kind (cf. Litt et al. 2008), advancing a view of decision-making as the outcome of cognitive as well as affective processes (cf. Thagard and Aubie, 2008). Despite this progress though, the relation between cognitive and affective aspects of decision-making is underexplored, and the ways in which emotions inform decision-making and reasoning in general remain unclear. In this paper, I adopt a view according to which emotions are representational in character and are influenced by their connection weightings, and argue that emotions influence the relation at hand in both a 'negative' and a 'positive' manner. Regarding the positive manner, I appeal to Hebbian (1949) associationism and show that emotions enhance formation of associations between representations of attended features as well as concepts. Stronger associations between representations influence the activation pattern of the representational/conceptual network and in turn influence reasoning and decision-making. The negative manner in which emotions influence the relationship between cognitive and affective aspects of reasoning concerns the idiosyncratic characteristic of emotional states to dampen existing associations that ground reasoning, or even bypass them. Finally, emotions grant us the ability to recalibrate our representational system by voluntarily activating conceptualised versions of alternative emotional states – a further positive role. This results in minimisation of the warping effect of emotions in our representational and conceptual networks and in turn in reasoning and decision-making.

Keywords: Emotions; reasoning; decision-making; associations.