THE VALUE OF FEELINGS FOR DECISION-MAKING

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1. Introduction

The dichotomy between emotional and deliberate decisions is deep-rooted in public belief, philosophy, and science alike. It is reflected in diverse areas, such as poetry (heart vs. head), schools of thought (Romanticism vs. Enlightenment), and gender stereotypes (female intuition vs. cold-headed men). Academic interest in the topic can be traced back to ancient Greece, but still, the debate seems to be flowering more than ever. The question is the following: Should we let our feelings guide decision-making, or should we rather engage in a ‘cold’ logical analysis of the decision problem? Which of the two strategies leads to better outcomes?

For a long time, it has been the dominant view that reason trumps emotion. Promoted by philosophers like Kant, this view lies in the middle of modern society. People who behave emotionally are thought to break diets, procrastinate important tasks, fail to exercise, take unnecessary risks, or spend money on things they do not need—despite their intention to do otherwise. Regarded in this light, our feelings seem to drive us into decisions we later regret, and distract us from long-term goals.

However, in the past decades, research on emotions has gained a boost of interest, and with it emerged a more positive view of emotions. One of the most famous studies mentioned in this context is the work by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994). Patients in his studies suffered from lesions in prefrontal cortex, which caused them to have a reduced capacity to experience feelings. When confronted with a decision-making task, their performance was severely

* The question of the 2011 competition was: Can we Trust our Feelings? On the Value of Emotions for our Knowledge and Agency. The jury selected from 30 submissions two essays for a second prize and one essay which exceeded the space limit for a special acknowledgement. No first and no third prize was awarded this year.
impaired, although their performance in other cognitive tasks was normal. This phenomenon suggests that feelings play an important role in decision-making, and questions the traditional ideal of ‘pure reason’. Still, methodologically speaking, the studies are a rather coarse approach, which does not allow for more specific conclusions about what exactly feelings contribute to the process of making a decision.

In this paper, I want to find out whether we can rely on the guidance of our feelings, or whether we should consciously monitor and disrupt the influence of feelings on decisions, and favor reason. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I will introduce a distinction between emotions and gut feelings. While this distinction is not necessarily suitable for an ontological characterization of affective space, I do believe that the two phenomena need to be discussed separately with respect to the question at hand. In the second and third part, I will analyze the influence of emotions and gut feelings on decisions in turn. The paper is not an exhaustive overview of all the different theories that are out there; instead, it involves to a large degree my particular view on the debate.

2. Emotions vs. gut feelings

There are essentially two separate bodies of literature that are concerned with the influence of feelings on decisions, and it seems like there has been no substantial effort of unification so far.

One body of literature focusses on emotions. This research picks out a certain emotion, and tries to find a connection to types of behavioral decisions. These studies suggest that, for example, anger promotes risky decisions (Lerner & Keltner 2001), and guilt promotes pro-social decisions (Nelissen, Dijker, & deVries 2007). Providing a clear definition of emotion has proven to be difficult, but, simplifying somewhat, emotions are frequently characterized in the following way: Emotions are experienced as an episode during which a distinctive conscious feeling persists. This feeling is directed towards something, such as an object or an event (we are afraid of something). Emotions are also accompanied by a characteristic pattern of physiological (e.g., heart rate or muscle tension) and cognitive (e.g., attention or memory) changes. As a consequence of these changes, emotions bias certain types of behaviors (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang 2007). Emotions are usually the result of an appraisal of the current situation (Arnold 1960, Lazarus 1991). On a temporal scale, emotional episodes are longer than impulses, but shorter than moods. In short, emotions set the organism into a stereotyped mode of processing, which is triggered when the appropriate pattern is observed (Griffiths 1997). While some emotional responses are rather fixed