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Emotional Self-Dissonance

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Abstract: This paper identifies and characterizes a commonplace but philosophically neglected aspect of human emotional experience, which I call *emotional self-dissonance*. I start from the position that emotional experiences generally involve taking things to matter in ways that reflect what we already care about. Building on this, I suggest that our various projects, pastimes, commitments, relationships, and habits together comprise an *evaluative orientation* through which we experience things emotionally. Although this orientation is for the most part cohesively organized, tensions within it are inevitable. I suggest that emotions of familiar kinds often incorporate a sense of these tensions. In addition, emotional self-dissonance can amount to a form of emotional experience in its own right, one that encompasses considerable variety.

Keywords: ambivalence; emotion; evaluative orientation; feeling; identity; self-dissonance

Introduction

This paper sets out an account of what I call *emotional self-dissonance*, a feeling of disharmony, tension, or conflict relating to what we care about and how our lives are organized. Self-dissonance can be an aspect of familiar kinds of emotional experience. In addition, it can amount to a type of emotional experience in its own right. Emotional self-dissonance has not, to my knowledge, been singled out for discussion by philosophers of emotion. However, the relevant experiences are often expressed and conveyed in everyday discourse, film, literature, and elsewhere. A well-known and extreme example of emotional self-dissonance is what the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson famously calls an "identity crisis". Erikson refers both to conflicts within us and to circumstances in which we can no longer keep those conflicts at bay. An identity crisis, he maintains, involves both:

> Identity formation normatively has its negative side which throughout life can remain an unruly part of the total identity. The *negative identity* is the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual has to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable or by which atypical individuals and marked minorities are made to feel "different". In the event of aggravated crises, an individual (or, indeed, a group) may despair of the ability to contain these negative elements in a positive identity. (Erikson, 1970, p.733)

Identity crises are clearly experienced emotionally, but in ways that require further clarification. Moreover, if Erikson is right that they involve our becoming unable to regulate tensions within ourselves, there is the implication that such tensions precede times of crisis. Furthermore, various degrees and types of discrepancy could arise and persist without culminating in a full-blown crisis. So, I do not claim to discover something that has passed unnoticed. Rather, my aim in this paper is to identify and characterize something that has not been set apart *philosophically* as a distinctive aspect or type of emotional experience.

Many philosophical accounts of emotion share the view that emotions involve experiences of significance, mattering, or value, which reflect what we already care about. For example, my happiness and relief upon completing a book manuscript reflects my investment in the project and in a larger academic career, while my fear of the old, rickety-looking roller coaster reflects the fact that I care about my survival. Our emotions and the relationships between them are thus intelligible and situationally appropriate in light of our various cares and concerns, which together comprise a largely unified structure. I will refer to this structure as our *evaluative orientation,* although it could equally be termed an evaluative *stance* or *perspective*.[1] Phenomenologically speaking, it is a backdrop of projects, relationships, commitments, habits, pastimes, expectations, and norms *through which* we encounter things emotionally, as opposed to an explicit object of emotional experience. An evaluative orientation can also be construed as integral to a sense of *self* or *identity*, insofar as the distinctive organization of one's life amounts to a more or less articulate sense of *who* one is.

Evaluative orientations are intricate, heterogeneous, and dynamic, changing over time in ways that accommodate the implications of significant life events. Hence, it is inevitable that conflicts, ambiguities, and indeterminacies will arise *within* them. These can be specific or wide-ranging, and ephemeral or enduring. In what follows, I will develop an account of how we experience them emotionally. I will suggest that a sense of tension within our evaluative orientation can be integral to emotional experiences of established kinds, such as guilt and relief. Some, but not all, instances of mixed, alienated, or conflicting emotions are to be construed in these terms. However, self-dissonance can also amount to an important form of emotional experience in its own right, one that encompasses considerable variety. Most of the relevant experiences lack established names and are more often described in terms of feeling strange, awkward, disorientated, uncomfortable, detached, disconnected, like a fake, not like oneself, haunted, unfamiliar, and so forth. In some instances, at least, I maintain that such talk relates to a sense of tension or incongruity within one's evaluative

orientation. My discussion will proceed by first showing how certain widely accepted assumptions about the nature of human emotional experience *imply* that tensions within oneself can be experienced emotionally. Following this, I will propose that emotional self-dissonance can also arise without an additional object of emotion and consider some candidate experiences. Finally, I will sketch a phenomenological account of what exactly an experience of emotional self-dissonance consists of.

Emotional Evaluation

Despite their various differences, most philosophical approaches to emotion accept that (a) emotions somehow *evaluate* their objects, and (b) emotional evaluations relate—and ought to relate—to our pre-established cares and concerns. For instance, it is appropriate to feel disappointment when our hopes are dashed and inappropriate to feel happy about the suffering of someone we love. I want to show how the combination of (a) and (b) points to an important aspect of emotional experience that is seldom—if ever—distinguished explicitly by philosophical discussions of emotion.

The claim that emotional experiences reflect what we already care about has been couched in various different terms. Emotions might be said to involve experiences, feelings, perceptions, or judgments of value or significance, and to evaluate, appraise, or disclose how things matter to us. To explicate this broad position and explore its implications, I will start by drawing on some helpful distinctions made by Bennett Helm (2001; 2009; 2017; 2023). According to Helm, emotions are "felt evaluations" (e.g., Helm, 2001, p.22). The "target" of an emotion (often termed its "object" or, more specifically, its "concrete object") is felt to matter in some way—it might harbor the potential to further our projects, harm us, relieve us of a burden, entertain us, reward us, and so forth. These different ways of mattering are sometimes referred to as "formal objects" of emotion. Formal objects reflect, at least to some extent, established distinctions between emotion types. For example, the formal object of fear is danger or threat.[2] Importantly, Helm adds that the intelligibility of an emotional evaluation depends on the "import" of what he terms the "focus" of an emotion (e.g., Helm, 2017, p.37). For example, where the target of my fear is the hungry tiger, the focus of the emotion is my survival, which has a certain import; I care about it. Helm maintains that emotional evaluations track, or at least ought to track, relationships between their targets and the import of their foci. They are intelligible to the subject of emotion and to other interpreters insofar as they do.

Helm (2017, p.42) adds that "caring" for something involves its integration into a larger "evaluative perspective". We experience things as mattering (targets of emotion) relative to a longer-term and largely consistent set of cares and concerns (foci with import). Hence, emotions are not contextless responses to free-floating stimuli. Instead, Helm maintains that unfolding emotional experiences comprise "rational patterns" in virtue of the backdrop of integrated cares and concerns that renders them situationally appropriate. When we have one episodic emotion in response to an actual or anticipated scenario, this usually implies a host of other emotions, depending on how our engagement with a situation progresses. If we love someone, we will usually feel joy rather than sadness over their achievements. And if we are afraid of receiving a medical diagnosis, we will feel relief when the test result is negative.

Others make complementary points concerning the relationships between emotional experiences and presupposed values, albeit in different ways. For instance, Glas (2017) suggests that emotions have a "double-intentionality". They are directed at a concrete object or target: we are afraid of the dog or happy about the sporting victory. And, in another way, they are concurrently directed at our own values, which are "implicit" in our "immediate" emotional experiences of how things matter (Glas, 2017, p.144). Slaby and Stephan (2008, p.506) similarly emphasize this "peculiar double structure" of emotional intentionality, how it discloses what is significant to us and, in so doing, something of ourselves. The common theme is that emotional experiences of mattering, significance, or value do not arise out of thin air. Targets of emotion matter to us in ways that relate to an already established arrangement of concerns or, as Helm would say, foci with import. Phenomenologically speaking, these concerns ordinarily occupy the background of our experience. They are not themselves conspicuous objects of emotion or thought. Instead, they are implicated in what does appear emotionally salient. As Hochschild (1983/2003, p.85) remarks:

> Emotion is a sense that tells us about the self-relevance of reality. We infer from it what we must have wanted or expected or how we must have been perceiving the world. Emotion is one way to discover a buried perspective on matters.

I refer to this largely "buried" perspective, via which we experience things emotionally in an intelligible, organized way, as our *evaluative orientation*. Insofar as our emotions align with it, they might also be said to express or reveal something of our *identity*. Hence, as Glas (2017) suggests, by scrutinizing our own and others' emotional responses, we

can also learn something about who we are.[3] Complementing this, Brewer (2011) proposes that self-interpretation includes "the effort to bring one's half-formed evaluative sensibility into words". The close connection between emotion and identity is exemplified by those occasions when people distance themselves from certain actual or hypothetical emotional responses by saying "that's not me", "I'm not like that", "that's not what I'm about", or "that's not who I am". Of course, our *identity* could be conceived of in all sorts of ways. What I have in mind here includes what Korsgaard (1996; 2009) terms "practical identity", a self-description or self-conception that identifies what we care about and regard as worth doing. This includes roles and statuses such as being a teacher, religious practitioner, member of a political party, parent, or spouse. However, an evaluative orientation is also broader in scope. It further encompasses many other ingredients of a temporally extended, dynamic, organized human life, which together amount to a sense of *who* (as distinct from *what*) we are.[4] Although this structure is implicated in our responses to questions concerning who we are and how we live our lives, much of it remains pre-reflective. Hence, what is revealed through our emotions can be at odds with the kind of person we explicitly take ourselves to be.

Endorsement of this position does not require any particular account of what emotions *are*. They could be evaluative feelings, perceptual experiences, judgements or appraisals of some sort, patterns of attention, hybrid states, or something else entirely. For example, Deonna (2006, pp.35-8) compares emotion to perception, maintaining that emotions reveal (although not always reliably) the value that things have for us relative to an evaluative frame of reference, just as perception essentially includes a frame of reference or perspective involving our relative location. The point can equally be made in terms of the position that emotions are judgments of some sort. For instance, Nussbaum (2001, p.19) writes that an emotional judgment involves "appraising an external object as salient for our own well-being". Presumably, this includes appreciating its relevance to something we care about.

However, the relationship between emotional evaluations and evaluative orientations should not be construed too rigidly. That our emotions generally relate to how our lives are organized does not imply that all kinds of emotions do so, or ought to do so, in the same way. For instance, my curiosity or fascination in something need not reflect what I already care about (Pugmire, 2005, p.106). In addition, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether (a) an emotion fails to reflect our values, (b) our values have changed, or (c) we never actually had certain values in the first place even though we thought we did. For example, Goldie (2012) considers a scenario in which our intellectual life "goes cold" on us, where it is difficult to

distinguish an emotion that conflicts with our values from one that reflects a shift in our values. On other occasions, emotions are implicated in evaluative change; things appear significant in new and unanticipated ways, or cease to matter, leading us in new directions and changing what we care about. An important example is what Chappell (2022, p.8) terms an "epiphany", defined as "an overwhelming existentially significant manifestation of value in experience, often sudden and surprising". Such experiences can reveal something new to us, consolidate or reshape our values, and/or alter our emotional responses to some or even all situations.[5] However, although not all emotional experiences that we might judge to be situationally appropriate relate to evaluative orientations in quite the same way, it is doubtful that any of them are completely removed from what we care about. We might find all sorts of things fascinating, but an evaluative orientation still imposes constraints on appropriateness, such that certain emotional responses are discrepant with what concerns us or should concern us. We can thus distinguish between the likes of healthy curiosity and lurid fascination. The point applies even to our "epiphanies". There is a difference between experiencing and pursuing new, potentially self-transformative possibilities and being led by an emotional experience that is estranged from *all* of our values and undermines much of what we hold dear. The latter is to be avoided where possible; even radical openness to new possibilities comes with some norms attached.

Hence, the emotional evaluation of a concrete object or target can relate to a presupposed evaluative orientation in a number of different ways. It should be added that what Helm terms the "import" of an emotion's "focus" is plausibly intrinsic to the emotional experience rather than merely associated with it. In fact, it is difficult to see how things could be otherwise. Suppose one experiences intense disappointment upon losing badly in the final of a sporting competition. The initial emotional experience does not involve a wholly context-independent sense of the defeat as disappointing. One does not first experience how it matters (the disappointment) plus the extent to which it matters (how disappointing it is), and only afterwards figure out *why* it matters in that way and to that extent. From the outset, the emotional experience incorporates at least some appreciation of what was at stake and which aspects of one's life the disappointment relates to, a sense of why the target of one's emotion matters as it does. Similarly, we do not ordinarily start by finding something frightening and then seeking to determine why it is an appropriate object of fear (other than when startled and disorientated). The experience already includes a variably determinate sense of what is at stake for us—our health, our safety, the well-being of someone we care about, our finances, our standing in society, our relationships, our home. In this way, most emotional experiences

are embedded in the organization of a life. Were that not so, an initial emotional experience would be bereft of any relationship to situationally appropriate actions. We would always need to take the further step of identifying why we feel that way in order to have any grasp of which actions might be situationally relevant and appropriate. As I will now show, how we experience the foci of our emotions is complicated by the unavoidability of changes, tensions, ambiguities, and indeterminacies within an evaluative orientation.

Evaluative Orientations

So far, I have argued that (a) emotions involve experiencing things as significant or as mattering in various ways, (b) how something matters reflects what we care about, (c) having a structured emotional life requires having a structured set of cares and concerns, (d) phenomenologically speaking, that structure comprises an orientation or perspective *through* which we experience things emotionally, and (e) this orientation is not merely presupposed by emotional experience but also integral to it. The next step is to show that, although having an evaluative orientation requires some degree of structure and consistency, an evaluative orientation cannot be wholly consistent. Indeed, tensions of various kinds within it are unavoidable.

The events and situations that matter to us most include those that stand to alter the organization and trajectory of our lives and, by implication, our evaluative orientation. For instance, following a bereavement, many things may no longer matter as they previously did, given that their significance depended on our continuing ability to relate to a particular person in certain ways (Ratcliffe, 2022). In addition, the prospect of evaluative change is essential to our experiencing an open future that includes possibilities for development, disruption, and transformation—new relationships, projects, ways of seeing things. Pugmire (2005, pp.41-2) proposes that the profundity or depth of emotional experience is partly a matter of the "uprooting of background concerns", of an emotion's ability to "reconstitute its prevailing setting". This extends to our *experience* of its profundity. The degree and kind of significance possessed by an emotion's target depends in part on how it relates to anticipated or actual changes in the orientation through which it appears significant. Emotional evaluation therefore incorporates some appreciation of potential and actual evaluative change, of how our underlying perspective has been, is being, will be, or might be disrupted and altered by unfolding events.

There is a distinction to be drawn between (i) tensions within an evaluative orientation that arise due to the impact of emotionally significant events, and (ii) tensions

within an evaluative orientation that precede emotional evaluation and render the significance of events equivocal from the outset. I suggest that both are inevitable and also commonplace, given that human lives have a structure that is heterogeneous and dynamic. Which aspects of our lives contribute in consistent, reliable ways to our sense of how things matter? How we respond to a given situation can depend on the likes of short-term goals, longer-term projects, roles, statuses, professional and personal relationships, enduring commitments, habitual ways of doing things, established pastimes, shared norms, and autobiographical narratives, along with how these various ingredients of our lives relate to one another. Not all aspects of how our lives are organized relate to our thought and practice in the same way. For instance, we might be oblivious to the contributions of certain habits, which are never conceptualized or made explicit, while other aspects of our evaluative orientation could be frequent objects of attention, reflection, and discussion. Thus, an evaluative orientation is not a singular, homogeneous structure consisting of—say—propositional beliefs, evaluative judgments, habitual bodily tendencies, or something else; it is multi-faceted.

Moreover, different aspects of an evaluative orientation will be more salient at different times, as we move between contexts such as work and home, and between mundane and challenging situations. For instance, our immediate surroundings matter to us in different ways and for different reasons during a barroom conversation and a job interview. Different aspects of an evaluative orientation also have different temporal structures. Many smaller projects are embedded in larger, longer-term projects, which unfold over time and are revised in response to changing circumstances. However, certain commitments are unwavering over time, while long-term interpersonal relationships involve both consistency and change. All are to be distinguished from habitual activities and pastimes that repeat regularly or irregularly. Although some of these may seem trivial in comparison, it is arguable the "small things", such as "petting the cat or living where the sunlight has a particular quality", are also integral to our lives in important ways that contribute to a sense of living meaningfully (Calhoun, 2018, p.6). It can be added that human lives vary markedly in structure, depending on factors such as age, stability of employment, culture, and individual differences.

Consequently, discrepancies within an evaluative orientation can also take many different forms: projects or relationships might conflict with one another or with something else; substantive commitments might be at odds with pastimes; professional and personal identities might involve taking situations and events to matter in contrasting and sometimes conflicting ways. Some discrepancies involve localized, circumscribed values conflicting

with one another. Others are more diffuse, involving large areas of one's life that are estranged from or in tension with one another.

A further complication here is that constituents of an evaluative orientation will depend on one another in different ways. For instance, *the intelligibility* of a project could rest upon an interpersonal relationship—I do all of this for her; my actions only make sense in relation to her. Projects can also be hierarchically organized, such that the collapse of a larger project renders numerous other projects unintelligible, along with all the habits and expectations associated with them. This loss of intelligibility is different from something becoming physically unattainable, as when we can no longer pursue a project due to illness or injury. Dependencies can also be context-specific, as when my doing something requires the support of a specific person in some types of situations but not others. Given the intricacy and variety of dependence relations within an evaluative orientation, points of tension will not always be explicitly or fully apparent to us. More plausibly, we have varying degrees of insight into their existence and nature.

Lack of self-integration can itself matter to us in different ways and to different degrees, depending on the kind of life we lead and what is at stake—whether our projects remain viable, our values consistent and coherent, and our interpersonal relationships sustainable. Hence, integral to an evaluative orientation is some sense of whether, how, and in which respects our own coherence matters to us. Given the ever-changing organization of a human life, it would be implausible to maintain that we do, or ever should, aspire to achieve complete consistency. More plausibly, pursuit of coherence is for the most part pragmatically motivated; we put up with discrepancies until situations arise where they become problematic in some way. An evaluative orientation is not, and cannot be, something rigid, homogeneous, and complete. As Amélie Rorty has argued, even though rational integration might serve as a regulative ideal (as might self-integration construed more broadly), it should be considered philosophically alongside an acknowledgement of the self's actual disunity, a disunity that is more adaptive than rational integration in many situations. This applies to both impersonal and personal (or more specifically phenomenological) perspectives on the self. For Rorty, what cognitive science might construe as a "loosely confederated system of subsystems" is equally reflected in the experienced "dissociation and disintegration" conveyed by great novelists (Rorty, 1988, p.22, p.24).

Given that the ingredients of a life are heterogeneous, it is not clear what it would even be for everything to hang together seamlessly—to have our habits, expectations, pastimes, projects, relationships, roles, and statuses somehow meticulously aligned with one

another. Nevertheless, a substantial degree of coherence and integration is required for our emotional lives to have structure—to make sense. And, as the various ingredients of an evaluative orientation are disrupted by changing circumstances, the sustenance of that structure is not something that can just take care of itself. One of the ways in which we become aware of such discrepancies and respond to them, I suggest, is through phenomenologically distinctive experiences of *emotional self-dissonance*.

My use of the term "self-dissonance" is intentionally reminiscent of the idea of "cognitive dissonance", introduced by Leon Festinger in 1957 and subsequently developed in different ways by others. With certain qualifications, cases of emotional self-dissonance can be regarded as experiences of cognitive dissonance. However, cognitive dissonance as construed by Festinger is broader in scope, accommodating many different cognitive discrepancies and ways of experiencing them (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). What I seek to identify here is not simply an emotional experience that relates in some way to one or another form of cognitive dissonance. I am concerned more specifically with how we experience discrepancies within our life structure while it continues to operate as a background to our experiences, thoughts, and activities. There is dissonance *within* the perspective through which we evaluate, something that we can come to recognize emotionally.[6] In another respect, though, emotional self-dissonance is broader in scope than most conceptions of cognitive dissonance. It encompasses not only explicit evaluative judgments and dispositions towards them but also patterns of habitual, bodily expectation and a host of other phenomena, which together comprise a ubiquitous and largely implicit background to emotional evaluation. This background can be at odds with itself to varying degrees and in different ways. I want to suggest that tensions and conflicts within it are experienced emotionally, in ways that do not depend upon an explicit, conceptual understanding of their nature and accommodate varying degrees of self-insight.

Experiencing Self-Dissonance

Emotional self-dissonance can be integral to emotions of established types, such as joy and sadness. In addition, it can amount to an emotional experience in its own right, one that does not fit into established emotion categories. I will start by considering more familiar emotions. Here, the possibility of emotional self-dissonance complicates philosophical conceptions of emotional ambivalence and recalcitrance. Take the utterance "I have mixed feelings about this".[7] In one scenario, my underlying values either do not suffice to determine how I should feel about *p* or invite conflicting emotions. Relative to the same set of values, *p* is good in

some ways but bad in others. In another scenario, I am ambivalent or conflicted over *p* due to tensions within my evaluative orientation. Greenspan (1980) offers some interesting reflections on ambivalent emotions but does not distinguish conflicting emotions from tensions within an underlying evaluative perspective. Instead, her discussion focuses on the nature of the former as they occur in a "basically rational person". Pugmire (2005, pp.170-171) remarks on a broader lack of clarity over the nature and even existence of "divided emotion". It seems at least that contrasting emotions sometimes share a common object. We can alternate between emotions and perhaps also experience contrasting emotions towards the same object at the same time. What is less clear, according to Pugmire, is whether ambivalence is ever integral to a single token emotion or to certain types of emotion. He also leaves room for forms of ambivalence stemming from discrepancies within the organization of our lives. We are, he observes, "complex" and so it should not be assumed that our "susceptibilities are all consonant".

At least three kinds of experience can thus be distinguished: (a) conflicting emotions that arise in evaluatively ambiguous situations; (b) individual emotions that are intrinsically ambivalent (the existence of which is questionable); (c) emotional experiences that reflect conflict among our pre-established values. To these, we can add the phenomenon of "recalcitrant emotion", where an emotion arises and persists despite running contrary to explicit evaluative judgments (e.g., Brady, 2009; Benbaji, 2013). However, the distinction between recalcitrance and emotional self-dissonance is not clear-cut. In a straightforward case of recalcitrance, a type of emotion occurs reliably in certain situations, in ways that are discrepant with all aspects of the person's evaluative orientation. In other cases, though, an emotion might be alienated from certain aspects of an evaluative orientation but not from others, reflecting conflicts within that orientation rather than something wholly estranged from it. For instance, an emotional experience could reflect short-term rather than long-term projects and goals, personal rather than professional commitments, engrained habits rather than explicit beliefs relating to a changed situation, certain interpersonal relationships but not others, and so forth. So, once the complexity, heterogeneity, dynamism, and context-sensitivity of an evaluative orientation are acknowledged, a host of experiences can be discerned that fall somewhere between pure recalcitrance and complete consistency with who we are.

Emotional self-dissonance is not a matter of first comprehending conflicts between values that we have endorsed, adopted, or remain disposed to adopt, and then having emotional experiences directed at these conflicts. Granted, emotions of various types can be

self-directed in that way. For instance, evaluative conflict could be an object of worry, shame, guilt, or even fear. What distinguishes such experiences is not the kind of emotionality they involve but their object. However, other emotional experiences have a different phenomenological structure: we experience tensions of various kinds *within* the perspective *through* which we continue to evaluate things emotionally. Such misalignments are associated with wide-ranging feelings of tension, discomfort, and disorientation.

Consider certain experiences of guilt. We might feel guilty about having done something clearly at odds with our values. However, some guilt experiences involve conflicting values; we also feel *torn*. A feeling of pride over our accomplishments can be tainted with guilt; what promotes certain values also runs contrary to others. For example, one might feel proud of one's promotion at work while at the same time feeling guilty over prioritizing one's job over one's family, or over wider tensions between these different aspects of one's life. The different significances are experienced concurrently, as is their incongruity. It is debatable whether this conflict should be construed as integral to a single, token emotional experience that we might label as ambivalent guilt or pride. But regardless of how we go about individuating emotional experiences, it is not a matter of feeling *guilt* in one case and *pride plus guilt* in the other, or of having a distinct evaluative attitude directed at an already established experience of pride. A guilty pride is an ambivalent pride, a pride that is hesitant, lacking, undermined.

There is an important structural difference between an unambiguous guilt over having done something contrary to certain values and a guilt stemming from evaluative conflict. Describing both in propositional terms as "feeling guilty over *p*" obscures these differences, a point that also applies to emotional experiences of other kinds. Take self-love and self-hate for instance. Both could be construed as directed at the self or its properties as an *object* of experience. Through an evaluative orientation, we accurately or inaccurately assess our own significant virtues and shortcomings. However, there is a difference between adopting an unambiguous attitude towards oneself and experiencing tensions within oneself. An attitude of love with the self as its object is quite different from an unreflective contentment with oneself that involves being at ease with one's evaluative orientation and how it hangs together over time. Likewise with self-hate, representing oneself as an object with highly undesirable characteristics differs from experiencing tensions within oneself, even though both could be voiced in terms of being flawed, fundamentally lacking, not who one could or should be.

We can also see how seemingly incompatible emotional experiences might occur together. For instance, explicit admiration of oneself could coincide with feelings of

inadequacy stemming from tensions within the perspective through which one's accomplishments are evaluated. Numerous other emotional experiences similarly require disambiguation. For instance, we might regret something that we once did from the vantage point of our current values. But we could also regret having held the values that drove us to do it in the first place, our having been that person. Both are distinct from regretting that we currently hold certain values—that we continue to experience and engage with the world *through* those values: "I don't want to be the person who keeps thinking and doing those things". In this way, it is arguable that many seemingly straightforward emotional experiences involve equivocation, ambivalence, conflict, and even apparent contradiction—the joy tempered by regret, the achievement that feels oddly like disappointment, the satisfaction imbued with a sense of loss.

However, there is a phenomenological issue that needs addressing at this point. I have proposed that emotional self-dissonance is structurally distinct from other forms of emotional experience that might be labeled as ambivalent or recalcitrant. But this does not imply the existence of a clear *phenomenological* difference. Indeed, it could well be that we often misinterpret the ambiguities and subtleties of our own emotional experiences. Nevertheless, there are grounds for thinking that such differences are phenomenologically discernable. Furthermore, it is plausible that self-dissonance can also be a form of emotional experience in its own right. In other words, we experience tensions within our evaluative perspective without the experience being concurrently directed at a more salient target of emotion. Here, it is especially clear that the relevant experiences are phenomenologically distinctive. We *feel* tensions within ourselves in ways that differ from other experiences of emotional conflict and are not captured by established emotion categories. Given that we can discern the difference when emotional self-dissonance occurs alone, it is plausible to maintain that we can also do so in many—although perhaps not all—other instances, where emotional self-dissonance is somehow combined with the likes of joy, guilt regret, pride, and sadness.

I suspect that many emotional experiences are primarily a matter of self-dissonance. However, although these experiences are commonplace, they are also elusive. Several philosophers have noted that not all emotional experiences fit into established emotion categories (e.g., Nussbaum, 1990; Campbell, 1997; de Sousa, 2006). Consistent with that view, most forms of self-dissonance lack established names. So, in making a case for their existence, we cannot simply provide an inventory of emotions with the relevant phenomenological structure. There are several reasons why we do not, and indeed cannot, identify emotional experiences of self-dissonance in that way. As their target is limited to our

own evaluative perspective, we cannot refer to them or seek to account for them in terms of publicly available entities, situations, and events towards which they are directed. In addition, they do not have an unambiguous formal object, along the lines of threat, loss, achievement, and shamefulness. Tensions within evaluative orientations involve conflicted experiences of mattering. So, we might say that their formal object is a widespread lack of integration between formal objects. This lack of integration is compatible with the concurrent involvement of different and competing formal objects. For instance, what appears threatening could seem at the same time seem oddly comforting or enticing. Hence, we cannot individuate these experiences by picking out singular, unambiguous formal objects. It may also be that philosophical language is inherently limited when it comes to identifying and describing certain forms of emotional experience. Nussbaum (1990, p.5) suggests that a "sense of what matters" is expressed not only through the content of one's prose but also through its style, in the "telling". Self-dissonance experiences are by definition ambiguous and conflicted. As such, they lend themselves to lengthy descriptions, which tend to be equivocal or seemingly contradictory: "I don't know how I feel"; "I don't know what to feel"; "my feelings are all over the place"; "I'm over the moon about it and at the same time sad—it's difficult to explain"; "everything is fine but it all feels wrong somehow".

Moreover, self-dissonance straddles established distinctions between episodic emotions, moods, and emotional atmospheres. It could be short-lived and fairly localized. It could also arise in a certain situation and be experienced as specific to that situation. For instance, we might feel tensions within ourselves when visiting places that were important in our lives. Other experiences involve enduring, pervasive, inchoate tensions that are sometimes expressed as deficits in oneself—I am incomplete, flawed, torn, lacking, not what I should be.[8] However, although self-dissonance presents challenges for description and classification, talk of such experiences remains widespread. Having first established what it is that we are looking for, we can then find plausible candidates all over the place, in narratives of emotion that do not take the straightforward form "I am afraid of *p*" or "I am happy about *q*". Here are three broad categories of experience, all of which can be further analyzed in terms of tensions within an evaluative orientation:

Conflicting Social Identities: Some self-dissonance experiences are structurally similar to more familiar forms of emotional conflict, involving the estrangement of our emotions from our values. Szanto (2017) addresses what he calls "emotional self-alienation" where, in Helm's terms, the "focus" of the emotion has become unclear. How we experience certain things emotionally is adrift from our evaluative perspective; it does not reflect their

"import". Similarly, Calhoun (2018, Ch. 3, p.62) takes estrangement from our "normative outlook" to be a "hazard" that is built into the structure of human agency. However, a normative outlook can also be at odds with *itself*. On occasion, there are tensions between *who we* are and pressures from elsewhere, perhaps from social and cultural norms and expectations. In other instances, though, our identity is at stake; the tension is internal to us rather than between who we are and what we feel or do. Szanto's discussion draws on seminal work by Hochschild (1983/2003) on "emotional labour", where one's professional role demands certain emotional performances and consequently experiencing at least something of the associated emotions. Sometimes, this involves having emotional experiences that are alienated from who we are or take ourselves to be, enabling us to distinguish between the "real" and the "false" self. However, as Hochschild observes, this distinction is not always clearly maintained. In fact, the majority of workers will "decide that each self is meaningful and real in its own different ways and time". And, where tensions arise, the "true self" can be something that we have to "work out, to take a position on" (Hochschild, 1983/2003, pp.133-136). Building on Hochschild's discussion, Brewer (2011, pp. 294-5) also makes clear that distinctions between one's own evaluative orientation and what is alien to it are not always straightforward. For instance, ongoing performance of a professional role can be integral to one's sense of self in ways that conflict with personal concerns, giving rise to inchoate feelings that one might examine further or, alternatively, fail to examine.

As Hochschild (1983/2003, p.181) observes, some of the relevant situations involve "feeling phony". The experience of *feeling like a fraud* also occurs more widely and is sometimes referred to as "impostor syndrome". In an insightful discussion, Hawley (2019) emphasizes the role played by evaluative beliefs concerning our accomplishments and competence. There is a "lack of belief in one's own adequacy", and sometimes a "belief in one's own inadequacy". This, she adds, can stem from prejudicial attitudes within a wider society or culture. Although Hawley focuses on belief, she also acknowledges a role for feeling: "popular treatments and academic research alike refer to anxiety, fear, a 'sense' of being a fraud, 'perception' of incompetence, or 'feelings' of inadequacy" (Hawley, 2019, p.208). This feeling eludes established emotion categories; one *feels like a fraud* in a way that is difficult to further analyze or qualify. The nature, scope, and legitimacy of the category "impostor syndrome" are all debatable (Hawley, 2019; Paul, 2019). Nevertheless, there are widespread references to such *feelings*. These can be construed in terms of tensions within

the orientation *through* which we engage with social situations and evaluate our own accomplishments, abilities, and status explicitly.

One might object that feeling like a fraud involves conflict between our evaluative orientation and something external to it, perhaps a nagging doubt that originates in the actual or imagined evaluations of others. Alternatively, perhaps there are tensions between a social identity that one is obliged to accept and an evaluative orientation that runs contrary to it (Helm, 2023). However, here and in other cases, it is doubtful that we can identify an external source of disruption or a merely *social* identity, to be pitted against a conflicting, more authentic sense of who we really are. Rather, our evaluative perspective shifts subtly as we move between a variety of social situations, such as home and work. A larger evaluative orientation thus accommodates patterns of movement between more localized perspectives, and with this the potential for conflict between them. Different contexts are associated with different habits and expectations, projects and commitments, norms and roles, and ways of relating to others. Sometimes, we are placed in situations where tensions arise between contexts for emotional evaluation, neither of which can claim the privileged status of being *who we really are* as opposed to *who we pretend to be*. For example, on those few occasions when I have given academic talks with one of my children sitting in the front row (smiling, looking bemused, or both), a performance that might otherwise have felt natural, delivered with full, unwavering conviction, has instead involved something approximating a feeling of insincerity, of putting on an act, even being a fraud. One aspect of an evaluative orientation undermines another, by making salient its contingency and its dependence upon a context that has been rendered ambiguous.[9]

More generally, consider the feelings of awkwardness, discomfort, tension, conflict, disorientation, and conspicuousness that can arise when sharing a space with professional colleagues and friends or family for the first time, or when introducing a partner to one's parents—a frequent source of television and film comedy. These are sometimes associated with remarks from others such as "I saw another side to you today", "I didn't know you were like that", or even "you're not who I thought you were". Tensions can similarly arise between political, religious, moral, and professional identities. These are not experienced solely in terms of contrasting and conflicting evaluative beliefs that one concurrently holds but also through wider-ranging *feelings* that something is not right or does not add up. Such tensions often occur in situations where we find ourselves *unable* to shift our evaluative perspective in the usual way, as when professional and personal situations are brought together.

Identities Past and Present: Tensions are also experienced between present and past evaluative orientations. Why, one might wonder, should we ever need to utter the likes of "it's all in the past now", "that's not who I am anymore", or "I've put those times behind me"? The answer is that *who we are* and *who we were* sometimes overlap in the guise of inconsistent evaluative perspectives. Who we were is not always unambiguously past; it may continually or sporadically shape our experiences of mattering in ways that rest uncomfortably with who we are now or take ourselves to be. For example, I recently attended a concert by a band whose music I had listened to avidly many years ago. As I stood there in the audience, my past *came alive again*, not to usurp a preceding perspective but to mingle uneasily with it, as though superimposed. Many other self-dissonance experiences similarly involve ambiguities and tensions between evaluative perspectives associated with different times in our lives—we continue to *see* things, to find them significant, in organized ways that are inconsistent in certain respects with our current situation. Such experiences might be described in terms of two selves, past and present, one of which has somehow returned to interfere with the other. However, as other aspects of an evaluative orientation will have remained more consistent over time or changed in different ways, any contrast drawn between past and present selves, identities, or perspectives will be incomplete, relating to some but not to all aspects of one's life. Emotional self-dissonance of this kind can be unsettling and distressing or involve joyful reminiscence, as when we feel ourselves change in the company of old friends. Some experiences, such as nostalgia, are ambiguous or equivocal in valence.

Other emotional experiences involve a contrasting evaluative perspective remaining salient as a *counterfactual* possibility. Enduring experiences of *loss*, sometimes termed "chronic sorrow", can take this form (Roos, 2018). What has been lost, due to something that happened or failed to happen, includes the ability to sustain a certain life structure, an identity that would have continued along a different path. However, that identity sometimes remains phenomenologically conspicuous as a set of alternative possibilities, in relation to which one's current perspective is continually or sporadically revealed as contingent and somehow lacking: "I am not the person I should have been"; "I was never given the chance to be me" (Ratcliffe, 2025).

Feeling Ill at Ease with Ourselves. Other plausible candidates for emotional self-dissonance include experiences that are diffuse, inchoate, difficult to pin down, and either persist for a prolonged period or arise fleetingly, sometimes repeatedly. For instance, people sometimes report a lingering discomfort with who they are—a sense of discord, lack,

absence, inadequacy, or wrongness. These experiences are conveyed in various ways: "nothing feels right"; "I feel ill at ease with myself"; "I'm not comfortable with who I am"; "everything feels wrong somehow"; "there's something not right—I can't put my finger on it". Indeed, references to feeling *unsettled* in a nonlocalized, nonspecific way are widespread (as can be illustrated easily via a few simple Internet searches). Sometimes, the experience relates to a certain time or place: "I wasn't myself back then"; "I'm just not myself at the moment"; "I didn't feel myself when we lived there". In other cases, the unease is couched as an enduring or even inescapable aspect of who one is, perhaps involving a sense of incompleteness, inadequacy, or lack. Experiences of this kind sometimes occur fleetingly, in ways that take us by surprise. I am thinking of moments when we are struck by the strangeness or even absurdity of activities that we were—until a few seconds beforehand—unreflectively immersed in: "what am I doing here?"; "how have I become this?"; "what has happened to me?"; "how can this be me?"; "how can I be doing this?" We come to occupy an evaluative perspective that is in some way and to some degree dislodged from one that we previously inhabited. With this, things no longer matter as they did, and purposive activities no longer make sense in ways that we previously took for granted. Such feelings are expressed and conveyed in various different contexts and are sometimes interpreted in more determinate ways. For instance, they might be construed in clinical or religious terms, or be attributed to shortcomings within one's professional or personal life.[10]

These are just some of the experiences that I take to be good candidates for emotional self-dissonance. There are conflicts between one's own and others' evaluations of oneself, between social identities or personas associated with different kinds of situations, and between past and present evaluative perspectives. There are fleeting perspectival shifts and enduring experiences of being uncomfortable with oneself. This is not an exhaustive list or even a provisional taxonomy. I offer it only as a preliminary, partial sketch of what I take to be a substantial, complex, and diverse area of emotional life that remains surprisingly unexplored.

Self-dissonance experiences such as these can relate to and interact with one another in a number of ways. For example, an enduring discomfort with oneself might be expressed and interpreted differently in different social situations, which themselves then become sources of dissonance. This could elicit changes in one's social relations, which shape whether and how one then confronts, interprets, and responds to self-dissonance. Are we the "sick soul" that is ripe for religious conversion (James, 1902)? Do we finally need to face up to our past? Is it time for a radical career change? Will we find understanding and self-

integration through psychotherapy? Are we in the wrong place or with the wrong people? Are we somehow not what we ought to be or ought to have been? Should we let whatever it is remain inchoate and try not to be troubled by it?[11] Thus, emotional self-dissonance has important roles to play in temporally extended processes of evaluative reorientation and self-change. Such changes can be preceded and elicited by a more or less articulate sense that the shape of one's life is somehow wrong, discordant, or lacking.

So, an initial experience of self-dissonance might prompt us to further interrogate, interpret, and respond to sources of tension, in ways that also involve other emotions. I allow that rational deliberation and explicit evaluative judgments will often have important parts to play in the discovery of indeterminacies and ambiguities in our evaluative orientation. In addition, they can contribute to interpretation and evaluative change. This is consistent with the broader position that emotional experiences can yield insights into our underlying values and thus into the kind of person we are, serving as a starting point for self-interpretation and interrogation (Brewer, 2011; Brady, 2013; Glas, 2017; Cholbi, 2021).

Self-Dissonance as Emotional Experience

Why should we accept that self-dissonance is detected and also experienced in a specifically *emotional* way? I have already noted that experiencing something as significant in a nontrivial way is often a matter of recognizing its potential to reorient us, to alter the evaluative orientation relative to which it currently matters as it does. If emotional experience did not include some appreciation of actual or potential change in our evaluative orientation, emotions could not evaluate the significance of important events accurately—how they stand to change our lives in important ways. More generally, then, some awareness of our changing evaluative orientation is integral to emotional experience. Hence, the experience of emotional self-dissonance is implied by widely shared (but not universal) assumptions about the nature of emotional experience: it involves appreciating how something matters to us in light of an organized backdrop of cares and concerns.

To this, it can be added that the implications of significant events are often experienced emotionally over longer periods of time. We continue to *feel* their impact upon the organization of our lives. In English, it is sometimes said that something has *pulled the rug out from under our feet*, meaning—in some cases at least—that it has disrupted the very perspective through which we would ordinarily engage with things. Anticipated and ongoing changes in our evaluative orientation are sometimes described in terms of something *sinking in*: "it will take time to sink in"; "it feels as though it is still sinking in". In reflecting on

emotional experiences that involve temporally extended emotional processes rather than isolated episodes (as is often the case with guilt and perhaps always so with grief), it becomes especially apparent that much of human emotional life involves recognizing and responding to ways in which an evaluative orientation is disrupted by a concrete object of emotion. It is arguable that the relevant experiences are integral to a larger adjustment process whereby the organization of one's life is altered to fit a new situation, often over long periods of time (Ratcliffe 2022).

It is thus plausible that emotional experience in general incorporates some awareness of (a) the significance of a current situation *for* what we already care about, (b) the undermining of our evaluative orientation, and (c) ongoing change within our evaluative perspective. If we accept one or more of (a), (b), and (c), then we also accept that emotional experience is sensitive to potential and actual disruptions of an evaluative orientation that relate to unfolding events. In postulating experiences that are directed primarily or even exclusively at self-dissonance, the claim is simply that similar experiences of tension can also occur without being linked to a specific target or concrete object of emotional experience that is external to one's own evaluative perspective. So, there is no need to appeal to anything new here. The proposal is that some emotional experiences consist *only* of feelings of tension among our values, rather than feelings of tension plus something else. These experiences have a distinctive structure. Instead of a foreground object of emotion disrupting the context in which one's emotional experience arises, one's evaluative orientation is itself the principal or sole object of the experience.

I have said that the relationship between emotions and their evaluative context can be considered in a noncommittal way—it does not require any particular account of what emotional experiences are. Nevertheless, one might wonder how it is that wide-ranging conflicts within a largely pre-reflective evaluative orientation might be experienced emotionally. I will conclude by sketching my preferred answer. There is no need to appeal to some mysterious emotional *quale* that accompanies wide-ranging tensions among our values. Instead, we can start by acknowledging that these experiences have an essentially dynamic structure; it is as we interact with our surroundings that discrepancies become salient, coalesce, persist, change, and are resolved. This is analogous to experiences of dizziness and disorientation that only arise as we get up and start to move around.

It is debatable whether emotional experiences of significance or mattering are specifically *perceptual* in nature. However, they are at least perception-like to the extent that entities, events, and situations strike us as immediately significant in various ways without

recourse to phenomenologically distinct judgments. And how we experience significance is amenable to further analysis. One approach is to draw upon the phenomenological tradition so as to develop the position that all experience incorporates a structured system of possibilities, encompassing various different significant ways in which actions and events might unfold (Ratcliffe, 2008; 2015). Alternatively, we might appeal to recent developments of the "affordance" concept, including the proposal that we experience our surroundings as an organized "field" of different affordances, reflecting how things matter to us relative to backgrounds of individual and shared practices (Rietveld and Kiverstein, 2014; Dings, 2018). These two approaches are consistent with the position that, as we interact with our surroundings, possibilities are experienced as unfolding in structured ways that relate to what we care about. They also complement the suggestion that we are able, more specifically, to *feel* our own lack of coherence. In both cases, experiences of significant possibilities can be construed as inextricable from felt bodily dispositions and inclinations of various kinds (Ratcliffe, 2015, Ch. 2). An evaluative perspective thus appears in the guise of our ongoing relationship with the surrounding world and, more specifically, the organized possibilities that we experience as integral to entities, situations, and events. This also comprises a sense of what the immediate and longer-term future hold, given that how things matter to us now reflects a concern with longer-term projects and possibilities.

Tensions within an evaluative orientation can be construed in these terms, as involving unfolding patterns of significant possibilities that lack integration. While a world-directed emotion might involve experiencing something specific as mattering in a certain way, self-dissonance is encountered in a more diffuse fashion, in the guise of at least two unfolding patterns of significant possibilities that fail to cohere. So, rather than a full-blown loss of structure, there is nonlocalized incongruence between patterns. Possibilities are experienced *as* discordant—as overlapping and interfering with one another, as involving contrasting forms of significance and associated opportunities for action. These experiences are essentially dynamic. For example, a competing pattern of possibilities might be experienced as coalescing or resurfacing in ways that threaten to overturn an established life structure. This is not to suggest that emotional experiences of evaluative tension consist *only* of incongruities between concurrently unfolding patterns of significant possibilities. There may also be conflicting self-narratives and explicit evaluative beliefs for instance. Nevertheless, an emphasis on possibilities shows how such tensions could be experienced in ways that are pre-reflective, emotional, immediate, and do not depend on complex cognitive evaluations.

In summary, then, I have brought together the following themes: (a) how emotional experiences in general relate to what we care about, (b) the dynamic and heterogeneous organization of human lives, (c) the existence of emotional experiences that are frequently reported but do not fall under established emotion categories. In so doing, I have sought to identify and at least begin to analyze a rich and important aspect of human emotional life that I think has been insufficiently acknowledged by philosophers and other emotion theorists: experiences of tension within the evaluative orientation through which we encounter things emotionally. These are sometimes integral to emotions of familiar kinds, complicating the consideration of ambivalence and recalcitrance. However, emotional self-dissonance also amounts to a form of experience in its own right, one that encompasses considerable variety. To the extent that human emotional life is occupied with our own lack of integration, it is unavoidably messy and fraught with tension—hardly the stuff of simple, unambiguous intentional attitudes that fit into tidy categories. This is the price we pay for having a complex life structure that is in constant flux as we engage with a host of changing social situations.

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[1] Brewer (2011) refers to what I have in mind here as an "evaluative stance", "pre-reflective evaluative posture", and "evaluative outlook".

[2] See De Sousa (1987, pp.121-3) for further discussion of the notion of a formal object. See also Teroni (2007) for critical discussion.

[3] See also Taylor (1989) for complementary remarks on how the "self" can be construed as an underlying *orientation* that is disclosed by our reactions to significant situations. Taylor focuses on our ethical responses (broadly construed) and how their intelligibility presupposes orienting "frameworks" that are constitutive of our identity. In line with this, tensions within an evaluative framework might be construed in terms of *disorientation*. See Harbin (2016) for a wider-ranging discussion of disorientation-experiences.

[4] See Schechtman (1996; 2014) for discussion of the distinction between the "characterization" question, which concerns who we are, and the "reidentification" question, which relates to what we are.

[5] In this way, emotions are also integral to what has been termed "transformative experience", or at least those transformative experiences that involve undergoing wide-ranging evaluative change over a period of time, as with becoming a parent (Paul, 2014).

[6] This is not to deny that rational deliberation and explicit evaluative judgments also have important roles to play in the discovery of indeterminacies and ambiguities in our evaluative framework, thus feeding into emotional self-dissonance. In addition, they can contribute to interpretation and evaluative change. See Helm (2001, Ch.7) for some good examples.

[7] For the most part, such utterances concern tensions between feelings rather than feelings made up from combinations or mixtures of other feelings. In this paper, I am concerned only with the former. For a consideration of the latter, see Zaborowski (2020).

[8] Some experiences of this latter kind can also be categorized as *existential feelings*, ways of experiencing one's relationship with the world as a whole that constrain the kinds of significant possibilities we are open to (Ratcliffe, 2008; 2015). For instance, all of one's experiences might be shaped by a pervasive sense of discordance and unease—nothing seems quite right. However, not all self-dissonance takes this form. Other experiences involve tensions relating to more specific aspects of one's life or certain situations. Hence, "emotional self-dissonance" and "existential feeling" are distinct but overlapping phenomenological categories.

[9] Erving Goffman (1959) construes such conflicting orientations as "personas" through which we "present" ourselves to others in a manner akin to theatrical performances. This is not just a matter of self-consciously acting. Although we might explicitly strive to present ourselves in certain ways, much remains pre-reflective, including how things matter to us during different social performances and even the performances themselves.

[10] Talk of this nature is amenable to different interpretations and does not *always* concern self-dissonance. Hence, references to feeling uncomfortable or ill at ease with oneself should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

[11] At least some instances of reflecting upon and interpreting one's emotional self-dissonance are consistent with Eugene Gendlin's conception of the "felt sense" (e.g., Gendlin, 1978/2003). Gendlin describes a more specific process, called "focusing", whereby an underlying feeling is interrogated and altered by rendering its content explicit and determinate. Emotional self-dissonance could be construed as a distinctive subcategory of felt-sense experience.