

*How Should We Feel about Recalcitrant Emotions?**Krista K. Thomason*

In everyday moral experience, we judge ourselves for our emotional responses. We feel guilty when we are irritated with our children. We are horrified by a sudden malicious pleasure. To awkwardly paraphrase Joan Jett, we hate ourselves for loving people we shouldn't. Often the emotions that we criticize are recalcitrant emotions: they are emotions that we do not endorse or that conflict with our considered judgments. Fear of things that are not in fact dangerous is often taken to be the paradigm case of a recalcitrant emotion – I sincerely believe that the spider on the bathroom floor is not dangerous and yet I fear it anyway.¹ Most of the philosophical literature on recalcitrant emotions focuses on (a) whether and how they are possible or (b) whether and how they are irrational (see, for e.g., Greenspan, 1988; Mele, 1989; D'Arms and Jacobson, 2003; Rääkkä, 2005; Brady, 2009; Benbaji, 2013; Döring, 2015; & Helm, 2015). My interest here is in the ways we blame ourselves for recalcitrant emotions. On the surface, this self-criticism seems familiar and straightforward. If I have an emotion that I think I shouldn't have, it seems natural for me to judge myself for it. I aim to show that it is harder than it looks to explain self-blame for recalcitrant emotions. I will argue recalcitrance alone does not give us a reason to feel any particular way about our emotions and it is not sufficient grounds for self-blame.

To make my case, I will first survey three possible ways of understanding self-blame for recalcitrant emotions: we blame ourselves because they are irrational, we morally blame ourselves, and we blame ourselves for lacking self-control. I explain the disadvantages of each of these possibilities. I then conclude by arguing that in order to determine how we should feel about our recalcitrant emotions we must first do what I will call emotional self-interpretation. We have to work out the relationship between the particular emotion and our sense of self in order to know how we should respond.

¹ Greenspan (1988), D'Arms and Jacobson (2003), Brady (2007, 2009), Tappolet (2012), Benbaji (2013), Döring (2015), and Helm (2015) all use fear as an example of a recalcitrant emotion.

Before I begin, let me make some preliminary remarks. I will not stake out a position about what emotions are or are not – whether they are judgments, perceptions, or construals. I am interested in the phenomenology of self-blame, and when we blame ourselves for our recalcitrant emotions, it's not clear that we're using any of these distinctions to make sense of what we're doing. Additionally, I will not stake out a position about the precise nature of self-blame. I will not assume that there is one specific attitude or emotion that counts as self-blame. Although guilt is often taken to be the primary emotion of self-blame, anger, frustration, horror, shame, embarrassment, and disappointment also seem to be ways of experiencing self-blame. Here I will just say that I blame myself for an emotion when I *negatively evaluate* myself for feeling it. "Negatively evaluate" can mean that I make a negative judgment about myself for feeling a certain emotion or that I feel a second self-critical emotion (sometimes called a meta-emotion) about the first emotion.² Since I am adopting this wide definition, I use terms like "self-blame" and "self-criticism" interchangeably. Finally, I leave aside the question of whether other people have standing to blame us for recalcitrant emotions. Although the arguments I make here could potentially be used to explore that question, I will assume that self-blame and other-blame require separate accounts.

1 Are We Blaming Ourselves for Irrationality?

Although there is some debate in the literature about the precise definition, the best rough description of a recalcitrant emotion is that it conflicts with an agent's considered (or better) judgment or belief. An emotion is recalcitrant because it is "at odds with a decisive better judgment of the subject" (Mele, 1989, p. 279), because it "conflicts with an evaluative judgment" (Benbaji, 2013, p. 577; Brady, 2009, p. 413), because "the world is not as the emotion presents it" (Helm, 2015, p. 420), because it "persists despite the agent's conflicting judgment or belief" (Döring, 2015, p. 381), or because it "exists despite the agent's making a judgment that is in tension with it" (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2003, p. 129). Since we usually claim that we feel recalcitrant emotions for no reason and since we are often critical of ourselves for these emotions, it's easy to draw the conclusion that we must be blaming ourselves for being irrational.³ Although

² For an explanation and defense of meta-emotions, see Jäger and Bartsch (2006).

³ Greenspan (1988), Mele (1989), D'Arms and Jacobson (2003), Brady (2009), Benbaji (2013), and Helm (2015) argue that recalcitrant emotions are irrational.

this move appears straightforward, explaining exactly how this irrationality works turns out to be harder than it looks.⁴ Conclusions that we draw about the irrationality of recalcitrant emotions partly depend on what we think emotions are,⁵ but to get a sense of why explaining the irrationality is difficult, let us consider Greenspan's famous case of Fido the harmless dog.

Greenspan describes the case this way: "Ever since an attack by a rabid dog, we suppose, an agent has felt fear in the presence of all dogs, including Fido, though Fido is well known to him" (1988, pp. 17–18). As the story goes, the agent has recalcitrant fear: he judges that Fido is not dangerous and yet he is nevertheless afraid. Philosophers who use this case sometimes ignore Greenspan's opening phrase, namely that the agent was some time ago *attacked by a rabid dog*. Those who have never been charged by an angry dog might not quite grasp the power of this opening moment. Being attacked by any dog is terrifying enough; being attacked by a rabid dog ups the ante. Our agent could have been killed by this rabid dog. Luckily, he survived, but then had to go on to receive (no doubt painful) rabies treatment because the rabies might also have killed him. Given his experience, every dog he sees might reasonably dredge up a painful and terrifying memory. Described this way, what is it exactly that makes this person's fear irrational?

The main reason that his fear seems irrational is because Fido is not in fact dangerous. The case in favor of irrationality for recalcitrant emotions relies heavily on the notion of emotions having "fit" or "formal objects."⁶ Fear tracks, arises from judgments of, construes, or perceives the dangerous. Fido is not dangerous; therefore, fear is tracking, perceiving, or construing something that isn't there. This is why we say that we have "no reason" to feel whatever emotion is identified as recalcitrant. The trouble with the Fido case is that the agent's fear is tracking the dangerous

⁴ For discussions of the problems with identifying irrational emotions, see Davidson (1985) and Döring (2015).

⁵ Solomon (2007) and Nussbaum (2001) provide examples of broadly judgmentalist accounts, which are thought to have special problems explaining recalcitrant emotions. For explanations as to why, see Greenspan (1988), Helm (2001), D'Arms and Jacobson (2003), Brady (2009), and Benbaji (2013). Brady (2007), Döring (2015), and Tappolet (2012) offer explanations of recalcitrant emotions using perceptual analogies. For criticisms of this strategy, see Helm (2001, 2015). As Benbaji summarizes it, "Cognitivists ... cannot avoid ascribing a contradiction to the agent, while non-cognitivists cannot explain why the recalcitrant emotion is irrational at all" (2013, p. 580).

⁶ For discussions of fit, correctness conditions, and formal objects, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000), Teroni (2007), and Deonna and Teroni (2012a). For arguments against emotional fit, see Yang (2016).

under some description of “the dangerous.” Maybe Fido poses no immediate danger, but this account of “the dangerous” is too narrow. The agent’s bad experience provides him some reason to be uneasy about all dogs, including Fido. We can argue that the agent’s fear in the Fido case is tracking or perceiving “the dangerous,” but in a non-obvious way. There is nothing irrational about being afraid of the type of animal that at one point threatened your life.

Additionally, fear that looks irrational might be tracking something that is outside the scope of an emotion’s typical fit or formal object. Return to the example of the non-venomous spider in the bathroom. What if my fear of the spider is not because it is dangerous, but because it is creepy-crawly? We are not only afraid of things because they are dangerous; we are also afraid of the disgusting, the eerie, the creepy, or the uncanny.⁷ I see the spider in my bathroom, watching its little hairy legs creep across the floor. I imagine if I get too close it might suddenly scurry madly across my foot or up my leg. Notice that my fear of the creepy-crawly is not mitigated if you tell me that the spider isn’t venomous – creepy-crawlies don’t have to be venomous to be scary. People sometimes have a difficult time explaining why they are afraid of things that other people aren’t afraid of, and so they respond to persistent questioning with “I don’t know why I’m scared, I just am.”⁸ Our reasons aren’t always easy to articulate, especially when we are afraid of things that don’t seem obviously fearsome.⁹ Fears that looks to be irrational might not be once we realize that they are attuned to atypical objects.¹⁰

Setting aside these issues, let’s suppose we have a genuine case of recalcitrance with my fear of the spider on the bathroom floor. Let’s stipulate that there is no context we can give for the fear and that I have no other reason to be afraid. If I blame myself, we now need to understand why or how I am blaming myself for experiencing an irrational emotion. What

⁷ Windsor (2019) argues for a claim like this about the uncanny, although he maintains that we find the uncanny threatening in some way.

⁸ In my view, this point wrongly gets cashed out as “unconscious” judgments or beliefs (Greenspan, 1988, p. 19; Rääkkä, 2005, p. 477; Benbaji, 2013, p. 579). We can feel and think things that we cannot readily put into words, but those things aren’t unconscious.

⁹ Objectless emotions illustrate this: we can be sad or happy without being able to explain exactly why. Oddly, objectless emotions don’t seem to strike people as particularly irrational. See Lamb (1987) and Price (2006) for helpful discussions. For questions about the articulacy requirement for reasons, see Ebels-Duggan (2019).

¹⁰ These explanations help explain why agents might not warn others about the things they fear (Greenspan, 1988, p. 19). Fears that involve past history are likely attached the memories of the agent; he is reliving his own terrifying experience. There’s no need to warn others of the creepy-crawly because it’s not dangerous.

rational requirement is my emotion violating? Philosophers are divided on this question: some have provided possible answers while others deny that there is any such requirement.¹¹ Although I can't fully argue for this conclusion here, I agree with the latter camp that there is no rational requirement to avoid emotional recalcitrance.

Consider how difficult it is to identify the rational requirement that we supposedly violate when we feel recalcitrant emotions. Let's examine one plausible candidate: an emotion is irrational when its correctness conditions fail to hold. Fear, in this account, is irrational when its object is not really dangerous. The rational requirement we violate here would be something like: we (rationally) should only be afraid of things that are really dangerous.¹² As I've just pointed out, however, fear does not always track the dangerous and what counts as "dangerous" will vary with the personal history of the agent. Additionally, the claim that recalcitrant fear violates a rational requirement of correctness presupposes the idea that there is some identifiable standard that we can use to determine which objects are "really" dangerous. As Todd writes, "Even if ... fear [is properly directed] at the 'dangerous,' this tells us nothing in itself about what features of the world will or ought to be construed as ... a danger" (2014, p. 98). For example, a bear attack can cause serious physical harm, but it is also statistically unlikely, even among hikers.¹³ Suppose I am hiking and I want my emotions to meet the rational requirement: should I be afraid of a bear attack or not? Should my fear track the statistically likely or the physically damaging? There seems to be no non-arbitrary way to answer this question.¹⁴ Additionally, there seem to be cases where it is rational to not fear things that are actually dangerous. Driving poses a great deal of danger to human beings, but given how prevalent it is in our daily lives, we are likely to think that someone who actually fears driving – someone who tries to avoid driving and warns others against it – is irrational. We also know that our emotional responses to the same object vary for reasons that

¹¹ Brady argues that recalcitrant emotions violate both practical and epistemic norms of rationality (2009, p. 427). Helm argues when our judgments and emotions conflict, we experience rational pressure to resolve the conflict, in part because emotions are motivating (2015, p. 431). Tappolet argues that we face a rational requirement to make our emotional systems more reliable (2012, p. 221). Döring denies that recalcitrant emotions violate any rational requirement (2015).

¹² D'Arms argues in favor of this sort of view (2005). For arguments against this position, see Todd (2014).

¹³ From the U.S. National Park Service website: "Since 1979, Yellowstone has hosted over 118 million visits. During this time, 44 people were injured by grizzly bears in the park. For all park visitors combined, the chances of being injured by a grizzly bear are approximately 1 in 2.7 million visits." See www.nps.gov/yell/learn/nature/injuries.htm.

¹⁴ Todd raises similar issues with regard to emotions and the objectivity of values (2014).

have nothing to do with rationality.¹⁵ As Döring puts it, “The evaluative properties that the different emotions attribute to their targets thus are relative to the individual: what is dangerous to me need not be dangerous to you” (2015, p. 394). We feel different emotions about the same object because we value it or judge it differently. You love roller coasters because you are thrilled by their speed, and I hate them for exactly that reason. We both appeal to the same facts in explaining our emotions: the speed of the roller coaster. If we know this variation occurs, there is no way to determine which of us feels the right emotion unless we assume there is only one correct way to value or judge roller coasters.

One way to address this problem might be to adopt the claim that recalcitrant emotions are irrational when they conflict with an agent’s “better” judgment. Determining what counts as an agent’s better judgment will be complicated if we accept the idea that emotions and judgments can both track values or features of the world.¹⁶ Because of this, we can’t assume that when there is a conflict the emotion will be wrong and the judgment will be right. There are times when our emotions are telling us the “right” information and our considered judgments are not.¹⁷ For example, feelings of unease and discomfort have led people to get out of situations that were in fact unsafe even though they had no concrete evidence that something bad was about to happen. An emotion that conflicts with our judgments might turn out to be more accurately tracking values or features in the world than our judgments.

There is no doubt something intuitive about the idea that when we blame ourselves for recalcitrant emotions we’re blaming ourselves for irrationality. As D’Arms and Jacobson point out, people “often say things like ‘I can’t help being afraid’ or ‘fear isn’t rational’; that is, they do not claim their fear to be responsive to evidence” (2003, p. 130). Intuitive appeals aside, we seem unable to articulate what rational requirement recalcitrant emotions violate or why we blame ourselves for failing to meet it.

2 Are We Morally Blaming Ourselves?

If the irrationality of recalcitrant emotions doesn’t seem to capture our practices of self-blame, there is a second option. Perhaps when we blame ourselves for recalcitrant emotions, we are simply blaming ourselves for moral failings. For example, Tom has long been envious of the success

¹⁵ Helm refers to this as the “subject-relativity of evaluative properties” (2015, p. 429).

¹⁶ For lengthy discussions of these sorts of claims, see Greenspan (1992), Helm (2001), Roberts (2003), D’Arms and Jacobson (2003), Teroni (2007), and Deonna and Teroni (2012a).

¹⁷ Helm (2001, 2015) and Arpaly (2000) have examples like this.

of Betty, his colleague. Tom learns that Betty has just received the fifth rejection on a paper she is trying to publish and “he finds that he is pleased by the news” (Mele, 1989, p. 283). Tom believes his feelings of pleasure are unwarranted, but “unwarranted” can be interpreted in two different ways.¹⁸ Tom might believe that he has no reason to feel pleasure at this news – that this news is not the proper object of pleasure.¹⁹ But Tom might also think that his pleasure is morally unwarranted. He might believe that he is feeling some sort of malice or *Schadenfreude*, and that feeling pleasure at another person’s pain is morally wrong. His feelings are “unwarranted” in the sense that they are morally unjustifiable.

Although examples like these are common, it is unclear whether morally unjustifiable emotions are recalcitrant.²⁰ We typically think of recalcitrant emotions as somehow mistaken: my fear of the spider is incorrect because it wrongly presents the spider as dangerous. Tom’s malicious glee at Betty’s failure does not incorrectly characterize her failure.²¹ Since Tom is already envious of Betty’s success, her successes will pain him and her failures will please him – this is how envy works. The fact that Tom’s envy is petty, immature, or vicious does not entail that his malicious glee toward Betty’s failure is mistaken. We can say that Tom feels malicious glee against his better judgment, but what “better judgment” means here is different than what it means in the spider case. In Tom’s case, “better judgment” means morally better or more virtuous whereas in the spider case “better judgment” means correct or accurate judgment.

There is another way we might understand self-blame that might preserve the recalcitrance. We can see how it works by appealing to Smith’s rational relations view (2004, 2005, 2018). In Smith’s view, we can blame ourselves for what we feel because our emotions reflect our values, moral judgments, or characters.²² Our values and judgments are not always obvious or transparent to us, so our emotional responses can sometimes be more morally telling than what we claim. When we morally blame ourselves for our recalcitrant emotions, it’s because they reveal moral defects that either we would rather not acknowledge or that we do not realize are

¹⁸ I take this wording from Stocker (1987, p. 60) and Mele (1989, p. 280). Mele does not explain exactly which interpretation of “unwarranted” he means in the example.

¹⁹ I’m relying here on the distinction between fit and appropriateness. See D’Arms & Jacobson (2000, pp. 77–82).

²⁰ D’Arms and Jacobson (2000) have made a similar argument about the assumption that morally bad emotions are irrational.

²¹ Roberts resists this conclusion in regards to envy. He argues that envy wrongly presents its target as a competitor (1991).

²² For problems with Smith’s account of attributability, see Shoemaker (2011).

there. I say I trust my partner, but my jealousy shows I do not. My anger over the small slight signals that I am petty or impatient even if I don't see myself that way. My fear of the spider is showing that in spite of how I see myself, I am actually cowardly. In cases like these, our emotions conflict with what we claim to value or judge, so they share this feature with typical recalcitrant emotions. Instead of blaming myself because it is irrational to fear the spider, I blame myself because I ought to be brave and my fear of the harmless spider is revealing that I am not.

This description still doesn't quite preserve recalcitrance. It turns out that our emotions are reflecting our values – just not the ones we claim to have. The emotions conflict with our declared values, but they reflect latent or concealed values. Unlike the typical case of recalcitrance, the emotions are not groundless or without reason. I fear the spider in the bathroom because deep down I am a coward. Cowards are afraid of things like harmless spiders, so my fear is not mistaken in this respect. It is working as it should, given that I am a coward. When I judge that I shouldn't fear the spider in this case, what I am actually saying is I shouldn't be a coward. Blaming myself for that fear is really no different than Tom blaming himself for his malicious glee. The only difference is that while Tom recognizes and acknowledges his envy toward Betty, I claim not to be a coward even though I am. The object of my blame is not my emotion itself, but rather the hidden moral defect my emotion reveals.

The trouble with moral blame for recalcitrant emotions is that if we preserve true recalcitrance, the conditions for moral blame seem not to be met. If an emotion is truly detached from what we value or judge, then we cannot be answerable for it in the right way. As Shoemaker argues, “Your demand to me to justify an attitude reflecting a groundless emotional commitment will be without a point as a demand, for I am simply devoid of the resources necessary to engage with your communicative attempt” (2011, p. 611). If my fear of the spider is not a reflection of latent cowardice or the result of a concealed judgment that the spider really is dangerous, my fear is not really a part of my “rational network” (Smith, 2005, p. 255). Without this connection, it is unclear how I could be answerable for my feelings in the way that seems to be required for moral self-blame.²³ To see the problem, compare fear that is sufficiently detached from values or judgments to an irritable mood. Surely there are times when an irritable mood arises for reasons (stress at work or strained family relations), but

²³ For arguments about when self-blame is deserved or appropriate, see Clarke (2016) and Carlsson (2017).

sometimes moods arise for no reason. We blame ourselves when we act like jerks because we are in a bad mood, but we typically don't morally blame ourselves for just being in a bad mood. In part, we don't blame ourselves because a mood is just a mood. It's precisely not a reflection of a larger problem, a bad judgment, or a character flaw.

If moods float free from our rational network, surely emotions can as well. We have plenty of examples of what we might call intrusive emotions: unwelcome or surprising emotions that from our perspective seem to come from nowhere. Baier gives the example of someone who suddenly feels suicidal while standing in front of the sea (1990, p. 17). Shoemaker talks about a parent continuing to love a child even though the child is a serial killer (2011, p. 610). Philosophers who work on emotions have spent years trying to show that they are not arational forces that overtake us. In doing so, we have tended to forget that emotions are not always susceptible to reason. We can surely point to examples where people have talked themselves out of a feeling, have habituated themselves out of damaging emotions, or have over time come to care about something that originally meant nothing to them. But these strategies don't always work; human experience is littered with examples of people trying to unsuccessfully exert this kind of pressure on their emotions. All the right judgments can be in place yet the emotion comes anyway or it does not come when we expect it to. Our emotions can surprise and confound us.

If there are times when our emotions really are unconnected from our judgments, moral self-blame would seem like an odd reaction. Emotions that are detached from our evaluative judgments don't reveal anything morally dubious. It seems that we would no more blame ourselves for them than we would blame ourselves for our moods. If my emotions are surprising to me, I might be confused or bewildered by them. Confusion and bewilderment, however, do not seem to amount to moral self-blame.

3 Are We Blaming Ourselves for Lack of Self-Control?

Another way to understand self-blame for recalcitrant emotions is that we blame ourselves for insufficient self-control.²⁴ When we experience emotions that seem unwarranted or baseless, we often say things like "Get a hold of yourself" or "Pull yourself together." Blaming ourselves for a lack of self-control might explain our frequent feelings of frustration toward

²⁴ See Korsgaard (1996) for an example. For arguments that raise questions about this claim, see Adams (1985) and Smith (2008).

recalcitrant emotions. We're often frustrated at things we can't control – I can't get the lawnmower to start, so I kick it because I can't do anything else. As Smith puts it, "We expect grown-up people to exercise some control over the behavioral manifestations of their attitudes" (2008, p. 118).²⁵ Being in control of our emotions is a mark of maturity or adulthood. Children emote at the drop of a hat, but grown-ups aren't supposed to.

Some philosophers have pointed out that self-blame for lack of self-control appears similar to self-blame for akratic actions (e.g., Mele, 1989; Benbaji, 2013). I ought to be able to stop myself from eating that extra slice of pizza, but alas the pizza wins. If this is so, then perhaps this form of self-blame is rational criticism after all. What makes akratic action irrational and to what extent it is a rational requirement that we not act akratically is a storied debate that I cannot delve into (for a small sample, see Davidson, 1985, 2006a, 2006b; Mele, 1989; Arpaly, 2000; Jones, 2003; Kolodny, 2005; Kalis, 2018). What I can do is point out the questions that others have raised about the connections (or lack thereof) between akratic actions, self-control, and rationality. As I will suggest, these same questions can be raised about recalcitrant emotions, self-control, and rationality.

Is there a rational requirement to control our emotions? We should be wary here. Part of the reason that exercising self-control over our emotions seems like a rational requirement might have to do with the long-held belief that emotions are essentially irrational. Even though philosophers have long argued against this view, that doesn't mean it has translated into everyday practice. As Calhoun puts it, there is "a lingering sense that emotions are not trustworthy" (2004, p. 191).²⁶ Despite philosophers' efforts, it is common for people to think that emotions cloud judgment rather than enhance it or coexist happily with it. It is common for people to think that "emotional" is just a synonym for "irrational." Self-blame for being unable to control our emotions may in many cases be a shadow of the problematic conceptions of emotions as unruly forces that lead us astray.

If we do think that exercising control over our emotions is a rational requirement, we are still faced with the task of explaining how. Once again, the connection is not as straightforward as it seems. To see the difficulties, consider first the case of akratic actions. For instance, Mele argues that not every exercise of self-control is in the service of one's better judgment (1989,

²⁵ Smith cashes out this criticism in terms of moral blame.

²⁶ For examples of feminist critiques about the irrationality of emotions, see Jaggar (1989) and Calhoun (2004). For arguments about the intersection between emotional criticism and race, see Spelman (1989) and Cherry (2018).

pp. 54–55). Suppose I forgo the extra pizza because I am some strange sort of Pythagorean and I have a belief that one should refrain from destroying too many triangle-shaped objects. It's hard to say that my self-control is working in favor of my better judgment. Additionally, Arpaly argues that there are times when acting against one's better judgment is more rational than acting in concert with it (2000, pp. 491–493). Suppose I am extremely regimented in my food intake: I never indulge even on my birthday or other celebrations. My food inflexibility actually makes me rather joyless to be around. In this case, my temptation to indulge in the extra pizza might be a kind of nascent awakening that my rigid attitudes about food are preventing me from enjoying my life. If I were to lack self-control and act akratically in this case, it would be the more rational thing to do.

These same problems arise in the case of recalcitrant emotions. I may exercise self-control over my fear of the spider because I wrongly believe that if the spider senses my fear it will summon especially fearsome battle spiders to come to its aid. Alternatively, I might control my feelings of fear because I aspire to a warrior ethic that holds any and all emotions to be a sign of weakness. Somewhat silly fictional cases aside, we can point to examples where an emotion that appeared to be recalcitrant was actually attuned to something real and serious that the agent overlooked in her reasoning (for examples of cases like this, see Jaggard, 1989; Arpaly, 2000; & Jones, 2003). Likewise, it isn't always the case that failing to control our emotions is rational. A sudden outpouring of love, a genuine flood of tears, or an outburst of anger from someone pushed too far may all be akratic and yet rational at the same time.

Perhaps self-blame for a lack of self-control is instead a species of moral self-blame. If we think that mature people are able to keep their emotions in check, maybe a lack of emotional composure could be understood as moral failing. Similar to the problem of rationality and akrasia, it is notoriously difficult to explain how self-control is morally good in general (see Kalis, 2018; Brownstein, 2018 for detailed discussions). One problem is that there is no single answer about what self-control amounts to. As Brownstein points out, people can exercise their capacity for self-control when they develop bad habits, harm other people, and harm themselves (2018, pp. 588–590). By contrast, some philosophers have argued that self-control has a built-in normative dimension because of its relationship to moral agency (see, e.g., Kalis, 2018; Korsgaard, 2009). In views like these, self-control provides the pre-conditions for acting morally because it is what allows us to act on reasons (Kalis, 2018, p. 76; Korsgaard, 2009, pp. 69–72). Even if we grant that self-control has a built-in normative

dimension, it may not follow from this conclusion that we should exercise control over our emotions. The kind of self-control needed for moral agency need not dictate control over emotions unless we think that emotions are threatening to moral agency. The impetus to control our emotions is often driven by the underlying assumption that they are arational disruptive forces. Once we abandon this idea, it is harder to claim that we should, all things considered, control our emotions as best we can. Additionally, our emotional experiences can reflect morally valuable responses and commitments, and not feeling strong enough emotions can be a mark of moral insensitivity. In some circumstances losing one's emotional composure can be more morally praiseworthy than keeping it.

4 Self-Blame and Self-Interpretation

So far I have argued that self-blame for irrationality, moral self-blame, and self-blame for lack of self-control do not fully capture our practices of self-criticism for recalcitrant emotions. One possible result of my arguments is that our practices of self-blame are simply misguided. Maybe we are simply wrong to blame ourselves for our recalcitrant emotions. Perhaps we would be better off developing a more accepting attitude toward emotions that conflict with our judgments, especially if we are willing to grant that there are times when our emotions are right and our judgments are wrong.

Although this conclusion is appealing, it too quickly dismisses our practices of self-criticism of our emotions. Emotional self-blame is ubiquitous, and even though common practices can be misguided, we should at least try to explain it before rejecting it. Rather than dismissing the practice of self-blame altogether, I will defend the claim that emotional recalcitrance all by itself is not sufficient for self-blame. Instead, emotional recalcitrance indicates the presence of a conflict within what Döring has called "agential identity" (2015, pp. 399–400). Döring appeals to agential identity as a way to explain the appearance of rational conflict in recalcitrant emotions. On this view, an agent has reason to resolve a conflict between her emotion and judgment if it forces her to deny an important part of herself, but not because she is rationally required to resolve it (2015, p. 400). The reason a hiker, to use Döring's example, should conquer her fear of heights is because the hiker would have to deny part of her identity by giving up hiking (2015, p. 400). I suggest that Döring's arguments can be extended to self-blame for recalcitrant emotions. That is, the mere presence of an emotion that conflicts with my judgment doesn't give me a reason to blame myself nor does it give me a reason to resolve the conflict. Expanding on Döring's arguments,

I argue that in order to determine how we should feel or what we should do about our recalcitrant emotions, we first have to do the work of what I call emotional self-interpretation.²⁷ Emotional self-interpretation involves working out the relationship between our emotions and our sense of who we are.

To help illustrate, start with a case of emotional self-interpretation that is straightforward. I hate roller coasters. I've ridden them a few times and every time I've been afraid. My fear comes as no surprise to me, given that I don't think of myself as a thrill-seeker. In this case, my sense of myself and my emotions point in the same direction. Moreover, my emotions and my sense of myself developed together. I tried roller coasters, I hated them, and I started to realize that these sorts of experiences weren't for me. Initially, I thought my fear might have been due to inexperience with roller coasters, so I didn't take it as definitive. Over time, I realized my fear was more telling than I first believed, especially when I found myself afraid in other thrill-seeking scenarios. My emotions helped me learn that I am not a thrill-seeker, and now that I think of myself this way, they are reflections of that trait. What I have described here is the "ongoing emotional-reflective process" where our emotional responses and our sense of ourselves develop and change together (Solomon, 2007, p. 265).

By contrast, recalcitrant emotions pose a self-interpretative problem for us. When we experience a recalcitrant emotion, we are faced with parts of ourselves that point in different directions. Return to my fear of the spider. On the one hand, I have my belief that the spider cannot hurt me and my desire not to be a coward. On the other hand, I have my emotional reaction to the spider. These two conflicting pieces of information force me to start asking questions about myself. Am I a person who is afraid of spiders even when they are not dangerous? If I am, does this make me a coward or not? Is my fear just a reaction or are my judgments about the harmlessness of spiders actually false bravado? Notice that the mere fact that my emotion conflicts with my judgment tells me nothing other than that there is a conflict. We know that emotional reactions can sometimes be more revealing than our stated judgments. I can't decide that my fear is the false thing without doing the work of self-interpretation.

Suppose it turns out that I am afraid of spiders even though I know they aren't harmful. What should I do? The implication of the arguments I made earlier is that there is no generalizable answer to this question. What

²⁷ I'm borrowing this term from Taylor (1985). Solomon argues that our emotions are part of having and creating a "sense of self" (2007, p. 222). Smith also uses this terminology; she claims that spontaneous attitudes present us with an "interpretative difficulty" (2005, p. 255). I have elsewhere discussed self-interpretation and shame (Thomason, 2018, pp. 169–172).

I do about my fear or how I feel about it will depend on my emotional self-interpretation. If I conclude that independent adults should take care of bugs in their houses and I aspire to this, then I should do something about my fear. I could try to conquer it by reading articles about the positive role that spiders play in the ecosystem or anthropomorphizing spiders so that they no longer seem scary. Notice, however, that doing something about my fear might just require me to figure out a way to manage it without getting rid of it. For example, I might have to coach myself through the process of catching the spider and putting it outside or squishing it with a long-handled broom. Alternatively, I might conclude through the process of self-interpretation that I am an arachnophobe. Plenty of people simply live with an intense fear of spiders. If they manage their lives in relatively healthy ways, there's no reason to think that they should work extensively to get over their fears. If they find that their arachnophobia interferes significantly with their lives or prevents them from being who they want to be, they may then have a reason to conquer their fears or blame themselves. When our emotions conflict with our judgments, it is the process of emotional self-interpretation that will determine what we do next.

One of the possible results of emotional self-interpretation is that we should remain emotionally ambivalent. We often assume that emotional ambivalence is a bad state to be in because on the whole it's best not to be conflicted or confused. Yet, as Coates has argued, there are reasons to resist this view. Coates gives the example of Agamemnon in Aeschylus's tragedy *Oresteia* (2017, p. 436). Agamemnon is faced with an impossible choice: he must either sacrifice his daughter or abandon the Greek expedition to Troy. As Coates argues, one of Agamemnon's major flaws is that he makes up his mind too quickly when he decides to kill his daughter (2017, pp. 438–439). It would have been better for Agamemnon to remain conflicted over his decision because the absence of conflict signals a failure to appreciate the seriousness of his crime. Coates's arguments are focused on ambivalent agency, but we can extend these arguments to ambivalent emotions. Imagine someone who becomes estranged from her family after years of conflict. Although she feels relieved, she also feels guilty for withdrawing. In this case, her ambivalent feelings may indicate that she recognizes that she too played some role in the conflict that ended the relationship or that ending family relationships is a difficult decision that ought not be taken lightly. Even if her guilt conflicts with her considered judgments, getting over those feelings might be a sign that she has too quickly absolved herself of responsibility or that she fails to realize the gravity of her decision. Emotional ambivalence can be part of the process of emotional

self-interpretation, but it can also be the outcome of the process. It might be better in some situations for us to remain emotionally conflicted.

Emotional self-interpretation can also explain cases when our emotions turn out to be *just* reactions. The result of self-interpretation might turn out to show that there is no relationship between the emotion and my sense of self. In the same way that I might find something funny that isn't characteristic of my sense of humor, I will have feelings that I can't always control or explain. For instance, in spite of the fact that I have been teaching for years, I still get anxious on the first day of classes. Sometimes these feelings are brief, and I can shake them off without much trouble. Sometimes they are more persistent, and it might take me time to get over them. But there is nothing deeper to them; there is no special story to tell about why I have them. I have accepted that they are "just feelings." Of course, the only way I could come to this conclusion is to self-interpret. I have tried to figure out if I'm worried about something going wrong or if I feel unprepared. Over time I've come to realize that there is no reason why I am nervous. Does this mean I should try to conquer these feelings? I think the answer is no. In accepting that they are "just feelings," I no longer feel the need to try to influence them with rational pressure. They are not hindering my life, and I know they will go away eventually. This is one way to deal with the conflict that recalcitrant emotions present: we can just accept that they come upon us passively and have no deeper ties to our rational network or sense of self.²⁸ In cases where our emotions are just reactions, there is often no need to exert rational pressure in order to change them. They come unbidden, and they will eventually just go away.

Of course, there are cases when our recalcitrant emotions are more than just feelings. Just because I don't endorse or embrace a particular emotion doesn't mean that it says nothing about me. Our stated judgments and beliefs can be wishful thinking or self-deception, and what we care about or what we value isn't always obvious to us. Our emotions can mean many different things. Sometimes they are clues that something is wrong. Sometimes they are the result of old habits we're trying to get over. Sometimes they are affirmations that we're on the right track. Sometimes they are just feelings. But they don't always come affixed with a clear label. We have to do the work of self-interpretation to determine what they do and don't say, which is why recalcitrance alone provides no reason to feel one way or another about our emotions.

²⁸ This is a strategy one finds especially in Buddhist philosophy. For an example, see McRae (2012).