

Touching the Good

Adam Lovett and Stefan Riedener

Abstract

It is appropriate for you to care more about your family and friends than about strangers, more about your own projects than someone else's projects, more about your keepsakes than another person's keepsakes. Some things are, as we'll put it, personally significant to you. In this paper, we give an account of personal significance. Our idea is simple. We think that you can come into contact with a thing's value. It is this contact with its value, this touching the good, that makes the thing significant to you. We articulate the notion of contact in terms of manifestation. We think that something's value can manifest in your life and your life can manifest in that value. This puts you in contact with its value. We then show how this account can provide a general approach to ethical thought. It illuminates our reasons of gratitude, compensation and promise-keeping, as well as how we discount for temporal and modal distance. All our reasons for action and attitude, we conjecture, emerge from contact with value.

Keywords— Special relationships · Manifestation · Gratitude · Compensation · Promises · Discounting

1 Introduction

Imagine that your dear neighbor, Rachel, has had a car accident. It was a foggy night; the rain had formed a thin sheen on the road. She took a sharp corner too fast and her car spun out of control. She was seriously injured and will be bed-ridden for weeks. That means the household responsibilities have all fallen on her partner, Lynn. Lynn must look after their children, do the housekeeping, manage their business. She clearly needs help. Now, you know there are thousands of people in Lynn's situation: single parents, overwhelmed caregivers, struggling businesspeople. Yet Lynn is your neighbor. You've known her for almost all your life. You have, to use a philosopher's term for it, a special relationship with Lynn. So you care more about her plight than you do about the struggles of strangers. Your heart wells up with concern when you think of lonely Lynn, overwhelmed by the sudden flush of new burdens. You offer to look after her children, although you wouldn't do so for a stranger in the same situation. Your response to Lynn's misfortune is much greater than is your response to the misfortunes of those with whom you lack a relationship.

We seem to have such special relationships to objects and projects as well as people. Consider, for instance, your childhood home. You love the place. You remember it as warm, cozy, welcoming. But the local government loves it a little less. And the local government wants to build a bypass. They need to knock down your house. The bulldozers threaten many homes as welcoming as yours. Yet you care especially about your own childhood home. Your breast is filled with anger when you think about them tearing your old house down. You'll do more to protect it than you will to protect any

other home. Similarly, you have a special relationship to your own projects. Imagine that you're a mathematician. You've worked for three years on an intricate proof. You think you've finally got it. You're about to send it off to the journals. But then you discover your mistake. The third lemma on the seventh page is false. Your work was in vain. Again, you're not alone in this fate. Many, perhaps most, honest efforts fail. Your failure is not objectively more regrettable than these. But we surmise that you yourself will regret it more. You will, we suspect, spend more time trying to repair your invalid proof than the invalid proofs of your colleagues.

In short, we all care more about some things than about other equally valuable things. You care especially about your neighbor's plight, about your home's destruction, about your work's missteps. This caring has both affective and practical dimensions. Affectively, you have a greater emotional response to these things than to other equally valuable things. You feel deep concern or anger or regret when you think about them. You don't have such a response when you consider comparably valuable things with which you have no relationship. Practically, you'll do much more in response to these things than to other equally valuable things. When your neighbor's plight calls for help, you'll answer that call, but the call of other plights leaves you unmoved. Moreover, and crucially, this is all as it should be. You're not making a mistake by caring more about your neighbor than a stranger. Quite the opposite: you would be making a mistake by ignoring your special relationships. You would go wrong by caring about everything as if from the point of view of the universe. You are, after all, not the universe: you're an individual, and you have your own point of view. As we'll put it, some things are personally significant to you. You have a special relationship with them. In virtue of that, you should care about them especially.

The aim of this paper is to provide an account of personal significance. This will be an account of what these special relationships *are*. Our idea is simple. We think that you can come into contact with a thing's value. It is this contact with its value, this touching the good, that makes the thing significant to you. We call this the contact account of significance. In section 3 we articulate the notion of contact in terms of manifestation. We think that something's value can manifest in your life and your life can manifest in that value. This puts you in contact with that value. In section 4 we adumbrate the explanatory power of our account. We show how it can explain our reasons of gratitude, compensation and promise-keeping, as well as how we discount for temporal and modal distance. Many of our reasons, in short, can be seen as emerging from contact with value. Finally, in section 5, we raise a conjecture. The conjecture is that all our reasons for action and attitude emerge from contact with value. This conjecture is, we argue, worth taking seriously. Thinking in terms of contact with value can provide a general approach to ethical thought. Yet, before we turn to this, let's say more about the phenomenon we aim to explain.

2 The question

We'll start with some stage-setting. Things have certain value properties. By this, we mean that they have properties that make certain kinds of affective and practical responses appropriate. Goodness and badness are paradigm value properties. But admirability, awesomeness and asininity are all also value properties in our sense. They all make certain responses fitting. So, for example, the Grand Canyon's grandness is a value property. It makes awe fitting; it gives you reason to venture into the Canyon. Its dangerousness, too, is a value property. It makes fear fitting; it gives you reason to

plan carefully before your adventure. Any property of something that makes a response appropriate is, in our terms, a value property. Things not only have such properties, we also construe them as having such properties. When you gaze on the Grand Canyon, you typically construe it as awesome. That might mean you believe that it is awesome. But perhaps you just have the impression that it is awesome. Or perhaps you just see it as awesome. Construing something as having some value property just means that you have some mental state that represents it as having the property.

We can now make clear the notion of ‘caring’. Let F be any value property. You care about something as an F when you construe it as F and on this basis have the kind of practical or affective response that F ness warrants. So you care about your friend as kind when you construe them as kind and on this basis have the responses that kindness warrants. You admire them, you repay their kindness. You care about them as cunning when you construe them as cunning and on this basis have the responses that cunningness warrants. You grudgingly respect them, you don’t cross them. Generally, caring about your friend consists in your taking them to have some value property and thus having certain responses to them. We take such caring to be ubiquitous and important. We care about all sorts of things: we care about people, objects, activities, events, facts. And our lives would be empty and colorless if we cared about nothing. Caring is the fire that imbues our lives with animation.¹

How much you care about something can be appropriate or inappropriate. Sometimes, we care too little about certain things. Imagine you find out your beloved mother has died, but you feel nothing. Not an iota of grief tickles your breast. Here you’re too cold; you should care more about the death. Sometimes, we instead care too much about things. Imagine you’re utterly overcome with grief when your football team loses. You are, let’s suppose, laid low for days, consumed with anguish. Here you’re too warm: you should care less about the loss. These two cases arise because how much you should care about something is in part proportional to how valuable it is. Something can be very good or just a little bit good, very bad or just a little bit bad. You should, other things equal, care more about things that are more good or bad. It’s appropriate for your attitude towards things to be, in part, a function of their value.

Yet how much you should care about things is not merely a function of their value. It is also a function of your relationship to them. That gives rise to our phenomenon. We will say that something is *personally significant* to you when you have a special relationship towards it, and this makes it appropriate for you to care about it more than it would otherwise be. The three cases with which we started exemplify this phenomenon. You should care especially about your neighbor’s struggles, your home’s demolition and your work’s failure. You should care about them more than about other, equally valuable things, due to your relationship with them. But there are many more such cases: you should care more about your child’s smile than another’s child’s smile, your partner’s beauty than a stranger’s beauty, a sunset today than one a year ago. In each case, you have a special relationship with the first thing. That is why you ought to care about it especially. It is why, in our parlance, it is personally significant. Our question is what makes something personally significant.

Let’s stress one thing. As we’ve glossed the phenomenon, it is not just people that can be significant to you. Objects and projects can be personally significant too. In

¹Our notion of caring is similar to Scheffler’s (2011) notion of valuing. The main difference is that to value something in Scheffler’s sense one must believe that it is ‘good or worthy’ (2011, 32). But one can care about something, in our sense, when one believes it is bad or terrible. This is the sense that one might, for example, care about injustice or poverty. This notion has been the subject of much other discussion. See, for example, Seidman (2009) and Kubala (2017).

that sense, personal significance is a general phenomenon; it attaches to many different things. We think that it is preferable to give a unified explanation of the personal significance of all these things. Now we don't think that such an explanation is mandatory. One can suffer disunity if one must: one might have to give very different explanations of the personal significance of different things. But, all else equal, unified explanations are better than disunified ones. It is better to have one explanation that applies in many cases than it is to explain matters piecemeal.² So we seek a unified explanation of the personal significance of different entities.

Now, that notwithstanding, we don't deny that there are differences between the personal significance of different things. Any adequate account of personal significance will respect those differences. But one must be careful here. One natural view of these differences is that the personal significance of people generates requirements, but that of projects and objects only ever generates permissions.³ You are required to care about something when you ought to do so, when you are making a mistake if you don't. The view says that you are required to care about your neighbor's misfortune but are merely permitted, and never required, to care about objects or projects. We think that this view is incorrect. There is often a *sense* in which you're required to care about projects and objects. Were you to be entirely indifferent to the crashing down of your lifelong dreams, your attitudes would be inappropriate. You would be unfittingly ignoring your plans' prudential value. Were the beauty of Michelangelo's *David* to leave you completely cold, your attitudes would be mistaken. You would be inappropriately unmoved by the statue's aesthetic value. Coolness to projects and objects can be mistaken. In this sense, you are required to care about them.

The difference between the personal significance of these different entities is instead the difference between moral and non-moral normativity. When you are required to care about a person, it is typically morally inappropriate for you to not do so. You do something morally wrong when you're indifferent towards them. That is why such indifference seems particularly egregious: moral wrongs are particularly egregious. Yet when you are required to care about an object or project, moral considerations are less often at issue. Indifference towards your projects' failures is not morally wrong: it is prudentially misguided. Likewise, apathy in the face of a great artwork is not morally mistaken: it is a failure of aesthetic sensitivity. So the personal significance of people generates moral reasons; those of objects and projects typically does not. Thus, we want an explanation of personal significance that respects this difference at the same time as being general and unified. In the next section, that is what we aim to provide.

Yet, first, these points helps us highlight the drawbacks of existing accounts of special relationships. These accounts have a slightly narrower focus than ours: they fix on just the practical aspects of partiality in caring. They aim to account for why, for example, we should help our nearest and dearest in cases where we needn't help strangers. We can divide such accounts into two families: reductionism and non-reductionism.⁴ Reductionists attempt to reduce reasons of partiality to other sorts of reasons: typically gratitude, promises or compensation.⁵ Consider, for example, the case of filial obligations. Children benefit enormously from their parents' love and care. Thus, they owe

²For a defense of this view in the context of moral theories, see Brink (1989, 249–52). For a more general discussion of it, see Keas (2018, 2775–80).

³Samuel Scheffler has suggested this to us in correspondence. It connects to his discussion in Scheffler (2004, 258–69).

⁴The distinction is from Scheffler (1997, 189). It's been taken up by many others. See e.g., Kolodny (2010, 40–42) and Wallace (2012).

⁵For discussions of these views, see Scheffler (1997, 189–91) and Wallace (2012, 176–83). For reasons of space, we focus on what Cross (2017, 17) calls 'moral obligations' views.

their parents gratitude. Reductionists might say that that is why one ought to help one's aged parents.⁶ Or consider the case of friendship. Friendship involves a set of tacit agreements about the relationship. We agree with our friends to help one another when times are tough. This is a type of promise. One should keep one's promises. Reductionists could say that this is why one should help one's friends out in tough times.⁷ Or think about parents' obligations to their children. Parents have put their children in positions of extreme vulnerability.⁸ By bringing them into the world, they've made them vulnerable to all its pains and terrors. This, perhaps, gives them duties of compensation to their children. A reductionist view is that this explains why parents should care especially for their children. Reductionism says that all reasons of partiality reduce to reasons of another sort in a like way.

The generality of personal significance reveals a serious drawback of such views. They're difficult to extend to objects and projects. It's peculiar to think that we owe promise-keeping, compensation, gratitude to things. You can't make a promise to your childhood home. So promissory obligations seem irrelevant. Equally, we don't generally owe compensation to objects we damage. If you break my chair, you should pay me back. But you needn't pay the chair back. And debts of gratitude in this context also seem misplaced. I might be grateful for the warmth of my wool coat, but I don't owe gratitude to the coat. One could make parallel points about one's projects. One doesn't owe gratitude, compensation or promise-keeping to the task of proving a theorem. So, although these views might have traction in the interpersonal case, their traction evaporates in other cases. Now this drawback doesn't decisively refute these views. One can content oneself with one theory for interpersonal cases and another for the other cases. But, as we've said, unified explanations are preferable.

Let's turn to non-reductionism. This view denies that we can reduce relational reasons to other ethical domains. A generic version of this view rests on the premise that one's relationships are of noninstrumental value.⁹ The relationship between friends, romantic partners, family members are all valuable in themselves. Since these relationships are valuable, one has reason to value them. But, on this view, what it is to value such a relationship is to see oneself as having a special reason to respond to the needs and interests of others in that relationship. And to have reason to see oneself as having such a special reason just is the same as having it. So we have special reason to respond to those with whom we share special relationships. Our reasons of partiality, then, don't derive from gratitude, promises or compensation. According to non-reductionism, they derive directly from the value of our special relationships.

Again, the generality of personal significance reveals the drawbacks of such a view. Non-reductionist views give one a list of putatively valuable relationships: friendship, family, neighborhood, citizenship and so on. They attribute value to all these relationships. But they rarely say what unites these relationships. They rarely explain why these specific relationships have value.¹⁰ The problem of doing so is greatly exac-

⁶For this view, see McConnell (1993, 209–231).

⁷Bazargan-Forward (2019, 2356) briefly mentions this view. For a longer discussion, see Seglow (2013, 92–94).

⁸For this point, see Wallace (2012, 178).

⁹This generic version is essentially the one described, but not endorsed, in Keller (2013, 49). It is most closely connected to the view in Scheffler (1997) and Seglow (2013). It differs from Scheffler's view in that, in his (1997), he only ever says one has reason to value one's relationships. Later, Scheffler (2018) also says the relationships are themselves valuable. It differs from Seglow's view in that Seglow focuses on the value of goods produced by the relationship, rather than that of the relationship itself. For a somewhat different non-reductionist view, which doesn't rely on the value of one's relationships, see Wallace (2012).

¹⁰Although see Kolodny (2010) for a partial exception.

erated when the view is extended to projects and objects. Our relationship to such things are multifarious. The non-reductionist has to say all these relationships are valuable too. But why is that? What unites these relationships so as to give them value? On these questions, non-reductionists stay silent. So it seems that they do not give a unified account of the value, and normative import, of our multifarious relationships to these things. They lack a unified account of personal significance. Now, this drawback doesn't decisively refute the view. One can content oneself with disunified explanations. But, as we've said, unified explanations are preferable.¹¹

One might hope, then, that a general and unified explanation of personal significance can be given.

3 The answer

We think that there is such an explanation. We will now give it. Our picture is that there is a vast universe of value facts out there. These are the instantiations of value properties. But you are in contact with just a fraction of these value facts. You can come into contact with a value fact, the instantiation of something's value, in two ways. The first is passive. This consists in it getting in touch with you. The second is active. This consists in you getting in touch with it. Both are equally important: both are ways of making contact with value. The view is that this contact with value is the relationship underpinning personal significance. Something is significant to you when you are in contact with its value. When you're in touch with a thing's value, you can and should care especially about it.

This view will take some unpacking. We begin with the crucial notion of contact. Here, we want to identify an especially intimate relationship between you and a thing's value; it is this relationship which puts you in touch with that value. We think *manifestation* fits the bill. Something's value can manifest in your life and your life can manifest in a thing's value. Both put you in contact with that value. What is manifestation? In the narrow sense of the notion, we can understand manifestation wholly in terms of dispositions. Consider a vase's fragility. This can be understood as the disposition to shatter when dropped. When you drop the vase, and it shatters, the shattering manifests that fragility. Now, the shopkeeper will surely scold you for shattering their vase. This is caused by the vase's fragility. But it doesn't manifest it. Fragility is not the disposition to cause scoldings; it is the disposition to cause shattering. Thus, only the shattering manifests fragility. Or consider a joke's funniness. This can be understood as a disposition to cause laughter when told. Thus, when you tell the joke on stage, and the audience laughs, the laughter manifests the joke's funniness. In contrast, imagine that laughing gas was released into the room just before the punchline. This would also lead the audience to laugh. But, in this case, the laughter might be no manifestation of the joke's funniness. The laughter would manifest the dispositions of the gas, not of the joke. Only laughter *at* the joke manifests its funniness.

We can illuminate this further, at least partly, via counterfactuals. A joke is disposed to cause laughter if, were it told, it would cause laughter. Call the antecedent of this counterfactual the disposition's stimulus condition and the consequent its manifestation condition. A disposition is made manifest when the manifestation condition happens because (a) the stimulus condition happens, and (b) because the relevant counterfactual is true. So, for example, the audience laughs because the joke was told, and because

¹¹Lord (2016, 573–4) also points out that the generality of what we're calling personal significance creates difficulties for non-reductionism. He does give a unified account of the phenomenon (Lord, 2016, 583–89).

were the joke to be told they'd laugh. When laughing gas leads the audience to laugh, they do not laugh because the joke was told. Thus, the laughter in this case is no manifestation of the joke's funniness. They're not laughing *at* the joke. This pins down our narrow sense of manifestation. It is the especially intimate relationship between a disposition and the thing it does when activated.

This relationship will be our link between you and a thing's value. But it is not clear that all value properties can be made manifest in this narrow sense of manifestation. For only dispositions can be made manifest in this sense, and value properties may not all be dispositions. Consider beauty. One might deny that beauty should be understood as a disposition. Thus, one might deny that it is manifest in aesthetic experience. Yet beauty does seem linked to dispositions. That a butterfly is beautiful explains, or perhaps is explained by, its disposition to cause aesthetic experiences. When you see the butterfly, this disposition is narrowly manifest in your experiences. That links you to the beauty. To encompass such links, we must define a broader, more technical, sense of manifestation.

To do this, we introduce the notion of a ground-theoretic connection. *A* is ground-theoretically connected to *B* just in case either *A* grounds *B* or *B* grounds *A*.¹² The fact that blood is red is ground-theoretically connected to the fact that it is crimson. The latter grounds the former. In contrast, the fact that the sky is blue is not ground-theoretically connected to the fact that blood is red. Neither grounds the other. We say that *A* manifests *B* in the broad sense when *A* or anything ground-theoretically connected to *A* manifests (in the narrow sense) *B* or anything ground-theoretically connected to *B*. Thus, suppose the audience's guffawing grounds its laughing, and the laughter manifests the joke's funniness. Then we'll say the guffawing too is a manifestation of the funniness. Or suppose the joke's funniness is grounded by its good timing. Then we'll say that the laughter manifests the timing. Finally, suppose a butterfly's beauty grounds, or is grounded by, its disposition to yield aesthetic experiences. Either way, the experiences manifest the beauty. In short, we treat grounds and grounded as the same for the purposes of this broad sense of manifestation.

We can now put our view more precisely. Let *F* be any value property. Our view is the

Contact Account of Significance: *x* is significant to you, as *F*, to the extent that (i) *x*'s being *F* is manifest in your current life, or (ii) your current life is manifest in *x*'s being *F*.

The key idea is that manifestation, in our broad sense, puts you in contact with value.¹³ The first clause picks out the passive aspect of such contact. In this way, when you laugh at a joke, that puts you in contact with the joke's funniness. The second clause picks out its active aspect. In this way, when your joke makes the audience laugh, that puts you in contact with the value of their evening. It is such contact that allows you to care especially about the joke or its reception. More generally, our view is that what it

¹²The relevant notion of ground is strict partial ground. For more on this notion of ground, see e.g., Fine (2012).

¹³Some writers use manifestation to understand how actions or attitudes can be based on other mental states (see e.g., Turri 2011; Mantel 2017; Lord 2017). We're indebted to this literature, but these writers use the notion somewhat differently to how we use it. They first identify certain disposition, like intellectual competencies or the ability to respond to reasons. They then say that, when these dispositions are stimulated, their manifestations are based in the stimulus. Here the dispositions play a mediating role: it creates a link between stimulus condition and manifestation condition. A different link, the one between the disposition and its manifestation, is what matters to our view.

is to be in a close relationship with something, in the normatively important sense, is to be in contact with its value. And the more closely in contact with something's value you are, the more you should care about the thing.

Let us make two more clarifications. First, what is 'your life'? We're thinking of a life as a collection of facts. A value fact's manifestation is in your life when it's in this collection. Your life is manifest in a fact when something in this collection is manifest in the fact. What are the boundaries of the collection? We think that there are many ways to specify these boundaries. We want one that suits our theoretical purposes. To that end, we'll say your actions, attitudes and dispositions are part of your life. That you ran a marathon is part of your life. That you think that marathon running is a trustworthy test of character is part of your life. That you're disposed to be exhausted for days after running a marathon is a part of your life. This isn't a fully general account of what is a part of your life. But it gives us a reasonably good, intuitive, fix on what facts are in and out of your life in the relevant sense.

We want to make another point on this. We think that your present, or current, life is what matters to personal significance. You should care about something insofar as it is made manifest in your life right now or your life right now is made manifest in it. That means your current actions, attitudes and dispositions are those that matter. This includes your current beliefs, memories, abilities, vulnerabilities. It includes things you're currently in the process of doing. If you're right now pursuing an academic career, such a pursuit is part of your current life. But it need not include things that happened to you long ago. Imagine, for example, that you visited Massachusetts as a child. The state might have played a big part in your childhood. But suppose the impact didn't stick; nothing it did to you then is manifest in your life now. You haven't retained, for example, a love of clam chowder or bad baseball. Then you shouldn't care especially about Massachusetts. Its value was manifest in your life; but it is no longer. It is just your current life which matters.

Second, what sets the extent to which a value is manifest in your life and vice versa? We think three factors set this extent. One, some things are connected to many dispositions. A value, for example, might ground or be grounded by several dispositions. The greater the number of such dispositions manifest in your life, the more that value is manifest in your life. The greater the number of your dispositions manifest in a value, the more your life is manifest in the value. Two, some things are more central to your life than others. Your disposition to care for your children is more central to your life than your disposition to sneeze when you're in the sun. The more your life's more central dispositions are manifest in a value, the more your life is manifest in the value. The more do the manifestations of the value make up central parts of your life, the more the value is manifest in your life. Third, some things are more central to values than other things. The Sistine Chapel's beauty is more central to the Vatican's magnificence than is that of the Papal altar. The more a value's more central dispositions are manifest in your life, the more the value is manifest in your life. The more your dispositions are manifest in things more central to the value, the more your life is manifest in the value. Thus, manifestation's magnitude is determined in many ways.

It will be illuminating to give an example of something the value of which you are not in contact with. Imagine that there is a beautiful painting locked in a vault in Beijing. The only one who sees the painting is its billionaire owner: you've never laid eyes on it, never even heard of it. Then nothing about the painting, it seems, will be narrowly manifest in your life. The elegance of the painting, for example, won't be narrowly manifest in your aesthetic experiences; you have no inkling of its aesthetic features. So, to be in contact with the painting's beauty, you would need something

ground-theoretically connected to this beauty to be narrowly manifest in your life (or vice versa). But it's unclear what that could be. The things that ground the beauty, the painting's symmetry, for instance, aren't narrowly manifest in your life. And the things the beauty grounds, the painting's impersonal value, for example, are also not narrowly manifest in your life. So you may not be in contact with the painting's beauty. The general lesson here is that there is a hard limit to how promiscuous contact is. The locked-away painting, and much else besides, seems to transgress that limit. Thus, the painting may not be personally significant to you.

That does with unpacking the view. We now turn to the evidence for it. This consists in how it deals with our initial examples. Let us start with your struggling neighbor. Lynn, stricken by her partner's accident, finds it hard to cope with the housekeeping, the children, the business. This is bad for her, in part, because she is a caring person. She is disposed to feel pain at her children's misery, to be distressed by her inability to be there for them. She cares about her business and her household: she is hurt by the fact that they overwhelm her. Were she insouciant in the face of such troubles, were she less of a caring person, her difficulties would matter less to her. Her dispositions, in this case her caring dispositions, partly ground that her struggles are bad for her. But that she is a caring person is manifest in your life. You've got through many a difficult night due to Lynn's emotional support. Your business stayed afloat because of the money she lent you. You are right now better off because of Lynn's caring nature. So the fact that Lynn's troubles are bad for her is manifest in your current life. Hence her plight is significant to you. You should care a lot about it. And something's being bad for someone gives you reason to lament it and improve it through actions. So you should empathize especially with Lynn's struggles, and be extra motivated to support her.

This story also goes for other interpersonal relationships. Consider relationships between children and parents. Usually, parents' valuable properties are manifest in their children's life and vice versa. Parents' dispositions to love and care for their offspring are manifest in their children's flourishing. Children's vulnerability is manifest in their parents' protectiveness, their ability to grow is manifest in their parents' experiences.¹⁴ Something similar is, we think, true of good friendships. But here the relationships are more symmetrical. Your friend takes joy from your conversational acumen. You get pleasure from their sharp wit. Your friend has benefitted from your stout dependability. You've relied on their emotional support. You have disclosed your inner life to your friend. They have opened themselves up to you. So your family and friends are of special significance to you. You are of special significance to them. More generally, when you have a special relationship to someone, you're especially in touch with their value or they're especially in touch with yours. You don't bear this relationship to strangers to the same extent. That's why you should care about your nearest and dearest more than about those distant from you.

Now let us see how this applies to objects and projects. Reconsider your childhood home. You remember its good properties well; it was cozy, warm, welcoming. These properties connect to certain dispositions. Something which is, for example, cozy is disposed to cause coziness experiences. It is disposed to cause memories of coziness. Thus, your memories manifest the dispositions of your home. They do not, in contrast, manifest those of some stranger's home. But these dispositions in part ground the tragedy of the home's demolition. So, that tragedy is significant to you. You should care about it especially. Finally, consider your failed mathematical proof. Part of what grounds the regretability of this failure is that, apart from the lapse in that lemma, the

¹⁴For a related point, see Brighthouse and Swift (2009, 53–54).

work was excellent. This excellence manifests your intelligence, creativity and patience. Your colleagues' work, in contrast, manifests their creativity rather than your own. So you are in contact with the regretability of your wasted work. And so it is significant to you. You should care about it especially. The contact account, then, provides a unified explanation for our initial cases.

Does the account respect the differences between the personal significance of different kinds of things? It does. The key point here is that different kinds of things are associated with different kinds of value. People are infused with moral value. Their lives have moral import, their autonomy has moral weight, their virtues have moral worth. Moral value gives rise to moral reasons. So your relationships with people often generate such reasons. But objects and personal projects, we think, are less often infused with moral value. Your projects typically have prudential value. The success of your project would be prudentially good for you. Some objects, like beautiful artworks, have aesthetic value. Others, like your childhood home, have teleological value: they are good at fulfilling their intended purpose. But these sorts of value each generate their distinctive kinds of non-moral reasons: prudential, aesthetic, or teleological reasons. So the personal significance of projects and objects generate such reasons. The contact account, then, gives us a unified explanation of personal significance these domains while respecting their distinctions.

We think that this speaks strongly in favor of the view. It does so on standard abductive grounds: the contact account is a unified, general theory that explains what we sought to explain.

4 Applications

4.1 Common sense morality

We now want to buttress the contact account by applying it to some novel cases. These are not, on their surface, cases where one has a special relationship with anything. But the contact account lets us understand them in terms of special relationships. We take the ability of the account to illuminate such cases to be one of its major virtues. The more explanatorily powerful a view is, we think, the more seriously one should take it. We begin with three domains critical to common sense morality: gratitude, compensation, promises.¹⁵ These all involve cases in which you should care especially about someone, but not because you have anything like a friendship or familial relationship with them. We think these cases can be understood in terms of your being in touch with their value. Thus, in a sense, we reduce the reasons that arise in these domains to reasons that arise from special relationships.

We start with gratitude. When someone benevolently benefits you, you should be grateful. This means, in part, that you should care about them doing well. You should help them out when you can. You should repay your debt of gratitude by benefiting your benefactor. Here's how the contact account explains this. By benevolently benefiting you, your benefactor made their dispositions manifest in your life. They manifested their disposition to set and satisfy good ends. This puts you in touch with this disposition. Yet their having this disposition in part grounds the fact that it's valuable that they have a good life. This is because it is good for those with good ends to fare well. Thus, you

¹⁵Why these domains? They were three of the domains that W.D. Ross (1931, ch.II) thought critical to non-consequentialist morality. We explore his fourth such domain, non-maleficence, in section 5. Ross, like us, thought that these domains should be explained in terms of special relationships (1931, 22).

are also in touch with the value of your benefactor's life. This means you should care about it especially. And that is just to say that you should be especially responsive, both emotionally and practically, to how well your benefactor's life is going. You should be distressed by its going badly, and you have especially weighty reason to improve it. We can see duties of gratitude, then, as arising from a special relationship. They arise when someone's virtue is manifest in your life.

Now we turn to compensation. Sometimes, regrettably, we ourselves wrong others. We commit injustices. We should care more about our own wrongdoings than about other people's. We should agonize about the injustices we have committed but can be relatively insouciant about those that strangers commit. Equally, when we wrong others, we owe reparations. If you have cheated somebody, you should pay them back. And this compensation has a quite peculiar feature: it should, as far as possible, fit the harm. If you stole someone's car, you should give it back. If you broke someone's leg, you should pay for their medical care. Here's how the contact account explains this. When you do wrong, you put yourself in touch with the harm that your wrongdoing gives rise to. Your disposition to act unjustly is manifest in the pain of a broken leg or the inconvenience of a missing car. The badness of the broken leg is in part grounded by its painfulness. That of the missing car is, in part, grounded by its inconvenience. Thus you are in contact with these bads. So you should care about them especially. You have extra reason to regret the harm that you caused, and to alleviate precisely that harm. We can see duties of reparation, then, as arising from a special relationship. They arise when your dispositions are manifest in some harm.

Third, we look at promises. When you promise to someone that you'll do something, you should care about whether the thing is done. When you promise to return someone's book to them, you should care about whether the book is returned. And you have special reason to return the book: you should keep your promises. To explain this, we rely on a common idea: that our promissory obligations are underpinned by an interest the promisee has in promises made to them being fulfilled. Such fulfillments are, at least typically, good for the promisee. The key move, for the contact account, is to claim that making a promise to someone puts you in contact with this underpinning interest. That is why you have special reason to keep your promises. Now, exactly how it does that depends on what interest underpins promissory obligations. Let's look at two options. Some think the underpinning interest is one in having reasonable expectations fulfilled.¹⁶ They think that we generally have reason to fulfil people's reasonable expectations, and this is why we should keep our promises. On this view, the contact account's explanation of promissory obligations relies on the point that, when you make a promise, you usually raise the promisee's expectations. These raised expectations manifest your ability to promise. So, for example, when you promise to return a book, that the promisee expects the book to be returned manifests your abilities. Thus, the weight of the reasons these expectations generate is amplified. So, you have especially weighty reason to return the book. You have special reason to keep your promises.

Alternatively, one might think that the relevant interest is an interest in having good relationships. The idea here is that someone's relationship with you is impaired if you break your agreements with them.¹⁷ Thus, once you have promised someone something, this gives them an interest in you doing the thing. The interest is just their interest in not having their relationship with you damaged. Thus, when you promise someone

¹⁶See, for example, Scanlon (1998, ch.7) and Hume (1987, 519–522).

¹⁷Why? Perhaps because such agreements help them manage their vulnerabilities, as Shiffrin (2008) thinks. By breaking these agreements, you expose their vulnerabilities. Or perhaps this is just an irreducible part of good relationships. The details won't matter for the story in the text.

you'll return their book, this gives them an interest in the book's return, whether they care about it or not. The key point, for the contact account, is that their having this interest manifests your ability to make them promises. They have this interest because you promised; were you not to have promised they might lack the interest. Thus, you are in contact with the interest. This interest gives rise to reasons. One has reason to avoid its frustration. As you are in contact with this interest, the weight of this reason is amplified for you. So you have special reason to ensure the book's return, and more generally to keep your promises. Which of these stories is more plausible depends on what sort of interest underpins promissory obligations. But we think promissory obligations too arise from special relationships. They arise because making a promise to someone puts you in touch with normatively potent features of their life.

We can thus explain duties of gratitude, compensation and promise-keeping in the same terms as we explain those of friendship, family and neighborhood. All are grounded by a special kind of contact with the person owed the duty. That the contact account furnishes us with these explanations redounds strongly to its plausibility.

4.2 Discounting

Let's further strengthen the case for the contact account. We'll do this by applying it to some cases of non-moral normativity. These are all types of discounting. We start with future-discounting. We care more about things in our near future than our far future. You're excited about your upcoming trip to Mexico but nonchalant about your trip, five years hence, to Italy. You'll save a lot now to spend on tomorrow's *móle* and Mayan ruins. You'll save less now to spend on far future pizza and papal residencies. Past-discounting is less discussed, but just as familiar. We care less about what happened to us long ago than what has just happened to us. Time heals wounds, maybe all wounds. When a relative dies, or we're deeply wronged, or one of our projects fails, we at first feel intense grief, anger, disappointment. But then the intensity of our emotions wanes. Eventually we may stop caring about the wound altogether. We might still love our dead relative, but we no longer grieve for their loss. We might still recognize a past wrong, but it no longer incites us to anger. And this is as it should be. It is pathological to maintain one's griefs and grudges without regard for the passage of time. It is fitting for our attitudes to wane over time.¹⁸ We think that, to its credit, the contact account can vindicate these phenomena.¹⁹

Let us first see this with future-discounting. Note that we emphasized the importance of your current life in the statement of our view. What matters is whether your current life is manifest in a fact or a fact manifest in your current life. Thus consider the far future. Some of your dispositions are made manifest in your far future life. When you carefully plan for your retirement, your current conscientiousness is manifest in your future nest egg. Your having that nest egg makes your retirement carefree. Thus, you are now in touch with the value of these future days. But you lose dispositions over time: nothing lasts forever. Thus, more of your current dispositions are made manifest in your near future than your far future. Your conscientiousness may be manifest in your far future life. Yet your current impetuosity, joyfulness, anxiety are manifest in your life tomorrow. In one, two, three decades you may well have lost these dispositions.

¹⁸For prior discussion of this, see Marušić (2018), Callard (2017) and Na'aman (forthcoming).

¹⁹Of course, some people doubt that future-discounting in particular deserves vindication. See classically e.g. Plato (2008, 356a-e) and more recently e.g. Broome (2004, 70ff.). But we take this to be a revisionary view. We clearly do discount the future. All else equal, it's best to have a theory that vindicates our common practice.

You may no longer be the impetuous, anxious youth you were. These dispositions may not manifest in your far future life. Thus, you are more in touch with the valuable features of your near future than your far future. So you should care about your near future more. But that is just to vindicate future-discounting.

A parallel story applies to past-discounting. Imagine your friend died yesterday, an untimely death. The badness of this death is manifest in your current life in two ways. First, it is manifest in all the absences that would be filled but for their death, in the conversations gone silent with their demise. You have yet to fill the void in your own life that their departure is disposed to leave. Second, it manifests in your emotional response. You in fact feel an extreme grief, an extreme sense of loss. And this itself is a manifestation of the terrible tragedy of your friend's death. Tragedies yield grief. But both these things wane over time: you get other friends, have other conversations. You think of their departure less and less and feel less intensely the pain of their loss. And thus the badness of the death is made less manifest in your present life as time goes on. You lose touch with it. And this gives you license to relax your grief. You have lost touch with the terribleness of their end. With grief, as with other emotions. As wrongs and failures recede into the past, they are made less manifest in your life. You should become less angry at the former and less disappointed by the latter. And that is just to vindicate past-discounting.

Let us turn to a different, less familiar, kind of discounting. This is modal discounting. We treat close and remote possibilities differently. Imagine that you're driving home from work. It is a wet and foggy night. Suddenly, a car comes in the other direction. They've gone around a corner too fast; they're spinning out of control. You slam down on the brakes, narrowly avoiding a catastrophic crash. You could have died; they are seriously injured. Now, of course every time you get in your car you could die. Driving is risky. But you care more about the modal fact when you narrowly avoid death than when death was a more remote possibility. The phenomenon here is that we care more about the fact that something could have happened when it almost did than when there was little chance of it happening. We care more about close than remote possibilities. Can the contact account vindicate such modal discounting?

We think that it can. The key point is that the grounds of close possibilities are manifest in your life to an extent that the grounds of remote ones are not. Consider what grounds the fact that you could have died on your way home from work, that a terrible tragedy could have befallen you. When you almost did die, many of the grounds of this fact are manifest in your life. The night's wetness is manifest in your slippery steering. Its fogginess is manifest in the low visibility. The other car spinning out of control is manifest in your burst of panic, your beating heart. More of these grounds are manifest your life than when you weren't at all close to dying. In this latter case, only the facts that there were other drivers on the road, that you don't have lightning reactions, are manifest in your life. Thus, you're more in touch with the close possibility than the remote one. So, by our account of personal significance, it's fitting to care more about the death that almost happened than one that was distantly possible. And this is just to explain modal discounting. One should care more about close possibilities than remote possibilities, because one is in closer contact with the former than the latter.

In sum, the contact account has a vast range of application. It explains reasons of partiality. It explains the reasons that arise from gratitude, compensation and promises. And it explains temporal and modal discounting. This is our master argument for the contact account: explanatorily speaking, it is enormously fruitful. Any view which explains such a wide-ranging collection of phenomena is worth taking seriously. This is why we find the account credible. Yet the breadth of such explanations raises a final

question: could *all* reasons for action and attitude arise from contact with value? We now consider the conjecture that the answer to this question is “yes”.

5 A conjecture

Our conjecture is that, whenever you have reason to care about something, that is because you are in contact with that thing’s value. Whenever you have reason to have some affective or practical response towards something, this reason arises from your being in touch with its value. When contact is understood in terms of manifestation, this means your reasons all arise from the manifestation of a value in your current life, or from your current life being manifest in a value. The picture that goes with this conjecture is that, when you are not in contact with a bit of value, that value is dark, or inert. It gives rise to no reasons for you. You need not have any attitude about the thing’s having the value. You need not act in any particular way towards it. By making contact with the value you light it up, you breathe life into it. This, and only this, means it generates reasons for you. Now, this is a conjecture: we’re not sure that it is true. Yet we do not know of any decisive objections to it; it can be defended surprisingly well. In this section, we outline that defense.

The first charge one might level at the conjecture is one of parochialism. The conjecture seems to imply that you shouldn’t care at all about certain things physically distant from you. The point can be put most strongly with a concrete example. Imagine that there is a terrible famine in Bengal. Millions of people are stricken by hunger; many die. You should not be emotionally unmoved by these distant deaths. Nor should you be practically indifferent to them. You should grieve their loss, and work to alleviate the famine. Yet one might think that you’re not at all in touch with the value of these people’s lives, or the tragedy of their death. And so our conjecture seems to imply that you should be unmoved by these deaths. It seems to imply a kind of parochialism, in that it implies that you should only care about the goings on in your rough vicinity. But this kind of parochialism is plainly erroneous; you should care about much more than the things close to you.

We think that there’s a good reply to this objection. The key point is that epistemic contact is a type of contact. When you come to know about the badness of a distant death, you are thereby in contact with that badness. This is, we think, because the badness grounds a disposition. The death is disposed to create knowledge of the badness precisely because it is bad. This disposition is manifest in your knowledge. But then, to generalize, whenever you know about a bad you are in contact with that bad. Moreover, knowledge may not be the only kind of epistemic contact. Perhaps understanding is a kind of epistemic contact; perhaps certain types of justification are too. This lets us evade the unsustainable kind of parochialism. When you stand in the right epistemic relationship with even very distant things, you should care about them. Now your contact with such things might not be very intimate; you are likely in much closer contact with the badness of your mother’s death than with that of a distant stranger’s death. Many more of the grounds of the former are manifest in your life. But still, when you know about the latter, you are in some attenuated contact with it. Thus, you should care about it to some extent.

Let us turn to a different objection. One might charge that the conjecture commits us to a kind of temporal myopia. It means that we must be blind to the import of future values. This myopia can take two forms. On the one hand, it can consist in a blindness to future goods. The key point here is that your actions can put you in contact with

goods that you are not now in contact with. Imagine, for example, that you've never been to the opera. You've never heard the Queen of the Night hit the high notes or been made somnolent by the Ring Cycle. So you have little contact with opera's value. Nonetheless, you have weighty reason to go to the opera. Yet, since you are not now in touch with the value of the opera, the conjecture suggests that that value has no normative pull on you. You lack weighty reason to attend the opera. A parallel point goes for less rarified activities. If you've never watched football, played poker, read comic books you may well have little contact with the value of such activities. And, thus, if the conjecture is true, it seems that you have little reason to experience those values. But this alleged implication of the conjecture is too conservative. We have weighty reason to explore new goods.

On the other hand, the alleged myopia consists in a blindness to future bads. The key point here is that your actions can put you in contact with bad things that you aren't now in contact with. Imagine, for example, that you punch a complete stranger. Before punching them, you are not in close contact with anything about them. You are not, in particular, in close contact with the badness of their broken nose. Yet, for all that, you have weighty reason not to punch them. This is a reason of non-maleficence, a reason not to do harm. Yet, since you are not yet in contact with the injury's badness, the conjecture suggests that it has no normative pull on you. So, perhaps, you have no reason to avoid the assault. A parallel point goes for other activities. Before insulting a bystander, vandalizing a painting, polluting a river, you may have little contact with the bads such things yield. Thus, if the conjecture is true, it seems you have little reason to avoid creating those bads. But this alleged implication of the conjecture is too libertine. We have weighty reasons to avoid bringing about new bads.

We think that there's a good reply to this objection. The key point is that certain modal facts are value facts. In these cases, the relevant modal facts are that it would be good if you went to the opera and that it would be bad if you punched someone in the nose. These facts warrant certain affective and practical responses. The former warrants looking kindly on the prospect of an opera trip. The latter warrants looking askance at the prospect of a punching. Moreover, you are in contact with these modal facts. Consider the fact that it would be good to go to the opera. This fact is, in part, grounded in certain of your dispositions. You are now disposed to be blind to opera's beauty. This disposition is manifest in your life in an absence: the absence of the enrichment that opera would bring you. Likewise, consider the fact that it would be bad to punch a stranger. This fact is, in part, grounded in certain of your dispositions. You are now disposed to lack a guilty conscience. This disposition is also manifest in your life in an absence: the absence of the besmirchment that violence would visit on you. So, you do have reason to seek out future goods and avoid future bads. More generally, we're in contact with the facts that it would be good to realize some good and it would be bad to realize some bad. These facts give us reason to welcome the good and rebuff the bad. That is the cure for temporal myopia.

The conjecture, then, can be defended from what we take to be the most serious objections to it. We think it may well be true. It may well be that all practical and affective reasons should be understood in terms of contact with value.

6 Conclusion

Plato once suggested that we should unshackle our chains, walk out of the Cave, and stare squarely at the shining light of goodness. The best life, he suggested, was the life

in contact with the Form of the Good (*Republic*, 514a-520a). Our view is reminiscent of this view. We too think that contact with value matters. But we think that one can come into contact with value in more ways than mere passive contemplation. Squarely staring at the good is not the only way to get in touch with it. One is also in contact with value one actively brings into the world. And we think that contact with value matters for reasons beyond its connection to the good life. One should care especially about something when one is in contact with its value. But we take some heart from the parallel between Plato's view and our own. We think both get at a magnetic, but elusive, idea. Both get at the sublimity of touching the good.

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