

# Touching the Good

**Abstract.** It seems appropriate for you to care more about your friends than about people you don't know, more about your keepsakes than the keepsakes of strangers, more about your projects than the projects of others. Some things are, as we'll put it, *personally significant* to you. But when is something significant to you? In this paper, we try to answer this question. Our idea is simple. You can come into contact with a value-fact. And it's this contact with value, this touching the good, that makes it significant to you. We articulate the notion of contact in terms of manifestation: a value-fact can be manifest in your life and your life can be manifest in a value-fact; and this puts you in contact with it. We argue that this captures standard cases of personal relationships to people, objects and projects. We then suggest that it explains a variety of other normative phenomena too: it illuminates our reasons of gratitude and compensation, as well as how we discount for temporal and modal distance. Finally, we venture an even more radical conjecture: *all* our reasons for action and attitude, we surmise, emerge from such contact with value.

**Keywords.** Special relationships • Manifestation • Gratitude • Compensation • Discounting

## 1. Introduction

Imagine 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. So the household responsibilities have all fallen on her partner Lynn. Lynn must look after their children, do the housekeeping, manage their business. 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 your entire life. You have a special relationship with her. So you'll care much more about Lynn's plight than about the struggles of strangers. You'll be more moved emotionally by her predicament, and do more to actively help her.

We seem to have such special relationships to objects and projects as well as to 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. Now the bulldozers threaten many homes as valuable as yours. But you'll have a stronger emotional reaction to its possible destruction than to the destruction of other houses, and you'll do more to actively protect it. Similarly, imagine you're a mathematician. You've worked for three years on an intricate proof. You think you've finally got it and are about to send it off to the journals. But then you discover your mistake. The third lemma on the seventh page is false. Much of your work was in vain. Again, you're not alone in this fate: many intellectual projects fail. Your failure is not objectively more regrettable than these. But you will regret it much more, and 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: we care more about the people, objects and projects to whom we have a special relationship. This caring has both affective and practical dimensions: we have a greater emotional reaction and will take more action in response to these things than to other equally valuable things. Moreover, and crucially, it seems that this is all as it should be: we're not making a mistake by caring more about our neighbors, our own homes and proofs. Quite the opposite: we'd make a mistake by ignoring our special relationships. We'd go wrong by caring about everything as if from the point of view of the universe. None of us, after all, is the universe. We're individuals, with our own points of view. As we'll put it, some things are *personally significant* to us. In virtue of our special relationship with them, we should care about them especially.

The aim of this paper is to provide an account of personal significance: of *which* relationships to things make it appropriate for you to care especially about them. Our idea is simple. You can come into contact with a thing's value. And it's this contact with its value, this touching the good, that makes it significant to you. We articulate the notion of contact in terms of manifestation: something's value can be manifest in your life and your life can be manifest in that value; this puts you in contact with it. We call this the Contact Account of significance (section 3). We argue that this account captures both core cases of personal relationships (section 4) and more challenging cases (section 5). Indeed, we suggest that it can also explain our reasons of gratitude and compensation (section 6), as well as how we discount for temporal and modal distance (section 7). Many of our reasons, in short, can be seen as emerging from such contact. Finally, we raise a conjecture: that *all* our reasons for action and attitude stem from contact with value. We argue that this conjecture is worth taking seriously: the Contact Account may provide a general approach to ethical thought (section 8). But before we turn to this, let's say more about the core phenomenon we aim to explain.

## 2. The question

We'll start with some stage-setting. Intuitively, you care about many kinds of thing: people, places, nations, truths and so on. But, for convenience, we'll assume that you fundamentally care about facts.<sup>1</sup> More precisely, we'll assume that you care about value-facts. A *value-fact* is a fact that warrants certain affective and practical responses: certain emotions, desires, intentions, actions and forms of deliberation. That the Grand Canyon is beautiful, for instance, is a value-fact in our sense: it makes it fitting to feel awe, and gives us reason to protect the canyon. That the Grand Canyon is dangerous is also a value-fact in this sense: it makes it fitting to be slightly afraid, and gives us reason to plan carefully before we enter the canyon. In the same sense, that something is admirable, asinine or funny are value-facts. We'll say that you *care* about a value-fact if you do respond to it with the affective and practical responses that it warrants. So for instance, you care about the fact that the canyon is beautiful if you actually feel awe in response to it and try to protect it if you can. You care about the fact the canyon is dangerous if you're appropriately respectful about entering it, and plan accordingly before you do.<sup>2</sup>

Now, you can care more or less about a value-fact: you can have a stronger or weaker emotional reaction to it, and take more or less action in response to it. And, importantly, how much you care can be appropriate or inappropriate. You can care too little about something. Imagine one of your close colleagues has died, but you don't feel anything at all: not an iota of grief tickles your breast. This seems too cold: you should care more about their death. But you can also care too much about something. Imagine your football team loses, and you're utterly overcome with despair: you're laid low for days, consumed with anguish. This seems too warm: you should care less about that defeat. These two cases arise because how much you should care about a fact is partly proportional to the degree of its value. Things can be more or less valuable. And other things equal, you should care more about something the more valuable it is. Thus your attitude towards things should in part be a function of their value.

Yet how much you should care about a certain fact is not merely a function of that value. It's also a function of your relationship to the fact. In particular,

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<sup>1</sup> It's easy to translate care about facts into care about things and vice versa. At a first pass, one simply says that you care about a thing (such as a person) iff you care about a fact concerning that thing.

<sup>2</sup> Our notion of caring is similar to Scheffler's (2011) notion of valuing. The main difference is that to value something in Scheffler's sense you must believe it is 'good or worthy' (2011, 32). But you can care about something in our sense if you believe it is bad or terrible: you can care about injustice or poverty, say. The notion of caring has been the subject of much other discussion. See e.g. Seidman (2009) and Kubala (2017).

intuitively, your special relationship to a value-fact can intensify the weight of your reasons to care about it.<sup>3</sup> This gives rise to our phenomenon. We will say that a value-fact is *personally significant* to you when you have a special relationship towards it, and this makes it appropriate for you to care more about it than it would otherwise be. Our three cases exemplify this phenomenon. You should care especially about the fact that your neighbor is struggling, that your house might be destroyed, or that your work has failed. You should care more about them than about other, objectively similar value-facts, due to your relationship with them. But there are many more such cases: you should care more about the cuteness of your child than about the cuteness of some random child somewhere far off; more about the beauty of a sunset today than about that of a similar sunset a year ago; more about the injustice of racism in your town today than about its injustice in 3<sup>rd</sup> century Rome. In each case, intuitively, you have a special relationship with the first fact. And that's why you ought to care about it especially. It's why, in our parlance, it is personally significant to you. Our question is what makes a fact personally significant to you in this sense.

Let's stress something. As we've glossed the matter, it's not just people that can be significant to you: objects and projects can be significant too. Personal significance is a very general phenomenon. That's not to deny that there are important differences here. For instance, your reasons to care about different things will often be of different kinds. When you have a special relationship to a person, it's typically *morally* inappropriate not to care about them. You do something morally wrong if you're indifferent towards their value. When you have a special relationship to an object or project, moral considerations are less often at issue. Indifference towards the value of your house or proof will typically be an insensitivity to aesthetic, historical or prudential value. Still, a vast range of things can be personally significant. So we think that other things equal, it's preferable to give a unified account of the personal significance of all these things. This is not to say that such unity is strictly theoretically mandatory. We can suffer disunity if we must. Perhaps to capture our intuitions, we need to accept that entirely different relationships underpin the significance of people, objects and projects. But all else equal, it seems preferable to have an account of personal significance that respects the relevant differences, at the same time as being general and unified.<sup>4</sup> In the next section, that is what we aim to provide.

Yet, first, these points help us highlight a problem of standard existing accounts of special relationships. These accounts typically focus on the personal

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<sup>3</sup> The idea that personal relationships are intensifiers is emphasized by Lord (2016).

<sup>4</sup> For a defense of the importance of unity in the context of moral theories, see Brink (1989, 249–52). For a more general discussion of it, see Keas (2018, 2775–80).

significance of *people*. And often, they appear to have important drawbacks once we bring the full breadth of the phenomenon in sight. As a standard example, consider Samuel Scheffler's influential account, which explains our reasons of partiality in terms of the value of certain relationships (1997; 2018). According to Scheffler, certain interpersonal relationships—those between friends, romantic partners, family members, and so on—are noninstrumentally valuable. Since they are valuable in this way, you have reason to value them. But to value such a relationship just is to see yourself as having reason to care especially about the other person in that relationship. And that you have reason to see yourself as having such special reason just means you actually have it. Thus, you have reason to care especially about those with whom you share special relationships. Our reasons of partiality derive from the value of these relations.<sup>5</sup>

The generality of personal significance causes problems for such a view. For a start, it may be plausible that the relevant *interpersonal* relationships are noninstrumentally valuable: perhaps friendships, marriages, working relationships are all intrinsically good. But it seems much less plausible that your relationships to the relevant objects and projects are valuable in this sense. Consider your childhood home. On the face of it, the relation you have to that house is that you've lived in it for some years. But it seems counterintuitive to say that the *relation* of having inhabited something is noninstrumentally good—and that you should care about your house because you should value that specific relation. After all, the inhabitation of things is not always good. Similarly, consider your mathematical proof. The relation you have to that proof is that you have produced it yourself. But again, it seems counterintuitive to say that the *relation* of having produced something is noninstrumentally precious—and that you should value your proof because you should value that particular relation. The production of things is not always good. Once we move to the multifarious relations you can have to these multifarious things, the claim that your special reasons stem from their special value at least seems much less intuitive.

Furthermore, the sheer plurality of these relations reduces the view's explanatory power. According to the view at hand, family, neighborhood, co-citizenship and so on are good. But what unites these relationships? In virtue of what are all of them valuable? Scheffler, at least, doesn't answer this question: he doesn't offer a unified theory of the value of interpersonal relationships.<sup>6</sup> We take this to be a problem for his view, and one that is greatly exacerbated when the view is extended to objects and projects. Our relations to such things are extremely diverse: they include the relation of having inhabited or produced, perhaps of

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<sup>5</sup> For similar ideas, see also Seglow (2013) or Kolodny (2010).

<sup>6</sup> In fairness, Kolodny (2010) tries to answer such a question.

having experienced, seen or contributed to something. *Why* should all of these relations be noninstrumentally good? What unites them? What sets them apart from relations that aren't valuable in this way? On these questions, the view stays silent. And this importantly reduces its explanatory power.<sup>7</sup>

Similar problems affect other standard accounts. Take Bernard Williams's view that your reasons of interpersonal partiality stem from your important ground projects (1981). Perhaps your intellectual endeavors, your friendships and marriage can be seen as your grand undertakings. But your childhood house, it seems, needn't be related to any ground *project* of yours: it's enough if it was the place you grew up in and therefore love.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, consider Simon Keller's 'individualist view', on which your reasons of interpersonal partiality stem from the value of the other individual (2013). A crucial challenge for this view is to explain *which* individuals we ought to care about especially, and *why* we ought to do so—given that many other individuals are objectively just as valuable. Again, this problem is greatly exacerbated once we move to the multifarious objects and projects that can be significant for you: without a unified account of which things are significant for you and why, the view lacks explanatory power.<sup>9</sup>

One might hope, then, that a general and unified account of personal significance can be given. So let's now turn to the explanation we favor.

### 3. The answer

We start from a simple intuition. You're in a kind of *contact* with the value of your former home or your mathematical proof. More precisely, you stand in passive contact with the value of that house: you've been affected by it. You stand in active contact with the value of your work: you have affected it yourself. You do not stand in such contact with the values of other buildings and intellectual endeavors. And that's why you ought to care especially about your home and your proof. More generally, there's a vast universe of value-facts out there. But you're

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<sup>7</sup> Lord (2016, 573–74) also points out that the generality of what we call personal significance creates difficulties for such views. He gives a unified account of the phenomenon (2016, 583–89).

<sup>8</sup> Keller (2013, 39–40) and Lord (2016, 527) mention a related worry even with regard to certain interpersonal relationships. We think this worry is all the more serious given the breadth of personal significance.

<sup>9</sup> Keller himself mentions this worry with regard to interpersonal relationships (2013, ch. 5). In response, he accepts a form of particularism (2013, 150–152). Many people have found this view unsatisfyingly non-explanatory even just with regard to interpersonal relationships (see e.g. Olson 2014, 624–626). Again, we think it becomes all the more unsatisfying once we consider how many things can be personally significant.

in close active or passive contact with just a fraction of them. And a value-fact is significant to you insofar as you're in such contact with it.

How ought we to understand this 'contact'? One simple idea is that contact is a causal notion: you're in contact with a value-fact  $p$  to the extent that  $p$  has a causal impact on you, or you have a causal impact on  $p$ . Your house had a causal impact on you, and you had a causal impact on your proof: thus you ought to care especially about them. However, this view is overinclusive. Consider Rachel's accident again. Suppose two people administered first aid after that crash, fell in love on the spot, and later started a family. Imagine that one of their children became a painter of beautiful paintings. Rachel was a chief causal contributor to the beauty of these artworks: if it weren't for her, they would never have been painted at all. But the fact that these paintings are beautiful doesn't seem significant to her: she doesn't seem to have special reason to appreciate them aesthetically. More generally, mere causal connections often seem too contingent or incidental. A more internal or non-accidental connection to something's value underpins personal significance.

We propose, therefore, that contact should be understood in terms of manifestation. Manifestation is to be understood in terms of dispositions. Consider the fragility of a vase. This is the disposition to shatter when dropped. Here its being dropped is the *stimulus condition* of the disposition and its shattering is its *manifestation condition*. The former stimulates, or activates, the latter.<sup>10</sup> When you drop a vase, its shattering manifests its fragility. Now perhaps since you have broken that vase, you need to refund the owner for their loss, and thus get into financial trouble. Your troubles are caused by the fragility of that vase, but do not manifest it. Fragility isn't the disposition to cause financial troubles. It's the disposition to shatter. So only the shattering manifests the fragility. People's dispositions can also be manifest. Leonardo Da Vinci was disposed to produce beautiful artworks. The beauty of *The Last Supper* manifests this disposition. Joseph Stalin was disposed to mercilessly vanquish his enemies. Trotsky's death manifests this. Thomas Edison was disposed to make ingenious inventions. The lightbulb's creation manifests that. Manifestation, in all these cases, is less accidental than brute causal connections. Thus, at a rough approximation, we will say that when your dispositions are manifest in a value, or a value's dispositions are manifest in your life, you're in contact with it.

But that's only a rough approximation. The problem with it is that, in this sense of 'manifestation', only dispositions are manifest. But perhaps some values are not themselves dispositions, or manifestations of dispositions. Consider looking at a beautiful painting. The painting's beauty is intimately connected to its disposition

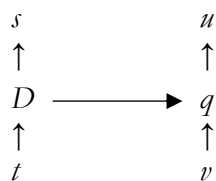
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<sup>10</sup> For an overview on the metaphysics of dispositions, see Choi and Fara (2018).

to cause aesthetic experiences. But, one might think, the beauty is not the very same thing as this disposition. So your aesthetic experience cannot, strictly speaking, manifest the beauty. Similarly, imagine you write a book of beautiful poems, yet your work is unjustly reviled by the critics. Your lyrical talent is intimately connected to the fact that the criticism is unjust. It's in part because you're so talented that it's unjust for your work to be reviled. But, one might think, your talent is not itself a disposition to cause unjust criticism. Talent might be a disposition to cause adulation, but not unjust revilement. So, strictly speaking, the injustice of the criticism won't manifest your talent. Still, intuitively, you are in normatively relevant contact with the beauty of that painting and the injustice of that criticism: you have special reasons to care about both. We want to construct a notion of manifestation that encompasses such contact with value.

To surmount this issue, we say the requisite intimate connection between values and (manifestations of) dispositions is one of ground. When a disposition grounds or is grounded by a value, and that disposition is manifest in your life, this puts you in contact with the value. Similarly, when the manifestation of your disposition grounds or is grounded by a value, this too puts you in contact with it. More precisely, we distinguish between two notions of manifestation. We'll henceforth denote the above, narrow sense of manifestation—in which only dispositions are manifest—as 'manifestation<sub>n</sub>'. If  $D$  is a disposition with stimulus condition  $S$  and manifestation condition  $M$ , we'll say that  $M$  manifests<sub>n</sub>  $D$  when  $M$  occurs because  $D$  and  $S$  obtain. In this sense, the shattering manifests<sub>n</sub> the vase's fragility. We use this narrow notion to construct a broader sense of manifestation, which doesn't distinguish between facts that stand in grounding relationships. We'll say that  $p$  is ground-theoretically connected to  $q$  if and only if  $p$  grounds  $q$  or  $q$  grounds  $p$ .<sup>11</sup> And we say that  $q$  manifests (without subscript)  $p$  if and only if  $q$  or something ground-theoretically connected to  $q$  manifests<sub>n</sub>  $p$  or something ground-theoretically connected to  $p$ . This broad relation of manifestation constitutes the kind of contact with value relevant to personal significance.

A little diagram may help to illustrate this notion:




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<sup>11</sup> The relevant notion of ground is strict partial ground. For more on it, see e.g. Fine (2012).



The upward arrows stand for the grounding relation. The left-to-right arrow stands for the manifestation<sub>n</sub> relation. So in this diagram, *t* grounds disposition *D*, and *D* grounds *s*; *v* grounds *q*, and *q* grounds *u*; and *q* manifests<sub>n</sub> *D*. In our broad sense of manifestation, *u*, *q* and *v* manifest *s*, *D* and *t*. Let us see how this applies to our cases. Imagine again that you look at a beautiful painting and have an aesthetic experience. Say that the painting is disposed to cause aesthetic experiences when people look at it (*D*), and that your aesthetic experience (*q*) manifests<sub>n</sub> this disposition. And say that this disposition is *grounded* in (rather than identical with) the painting's beauty (*t*). Then, we say, your experience manifests the beauty. Similarly, imagine that you write a book of beautiful, but unjustly denigrated, poems. Say that your lyrical talent is a disposition (*D*) to write beautiful poems (rather than to cause unjust revilement), and that the beauty of these poems (*q*) manifests<sub>n</sub> that disposition. And say the fact that your poems are beautiful *grounds* the fact that that criticism is unjust (*u*). Then, we say that the injustice of that criticism is a manifestation of your lyrical talent.

Again, we suggest that manifestation in this sense constitutes the relevant contact with value. For you to be in contact with a value-fact *p* is for some fact in your current life to be connected with *p* through some kind of (broad) manifestation relation. More precisely, our view is the

**Contact Account of Significance:** A value-fact *p* is significant to you to the extent that (i) *p* is manifest in your current life or (ii) your current life is manifest in *p*.

The first clause here picks out the passive aspect of contact. In this way, when you're elated by the beauty of a painting, that puts you in contact with its beauty: your elation is a manifestation of it. The second clause picks out its active aspect. In this way, when you paint a beautiful painting, that puts you in contact with its beauty: your aesthetic sensitivity is manifest in it. It is such contact that allows you to care especially about this beauty. The more closely you're in contact with a value-fact, the more you should care about it. This is the heart of our view.

Let's make two more clarifications. First, what do we mean by 'your life'? We're thinking of a life as a collection of facts. It includes all facts about what you ever do, feel, see, believe, or desire. Thus, if you once wanted to complete a marathon, think running is a good test of character, or remember your marathons with fondness, those facts are part of your life. Your life also includes all the dispositions you ever had. So, if you're disposed to be exhausted for days after running a marathon, that's part of your life as well. 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 it. Note, however, that according to the Contact Account, it's only your *current* life that matters to significance: you should care about something insofar as

it's manifest in your life right now, or your life right now is manifest in it. So what matters is only your present beliefs, memories, abilities and so on. Past feelings, desires or dispositions are irrelevant. Imagine, say, that you visited Massachusetts as a small child. The state might have played a big role in your infancy. But suppose nothing about it is manifest in your current life, or vice versa: you haven't retained, say, fond memories of clam chowder or bad baseball. Then you shouldn't care especially about Massachusetts. It's only the present that counts.

Second, what sets the extent to which a value is manifest in your life and vice versa? We think this is a matter of how *central* the manifestation-relata are to your life and to a value-fact. On the one hand, some things are more central to your life than other things. Your love for your children is more central to your life than your aversion to toads. On the other hand, 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. This intuitive notion of centrality can be interpreted ground-theoretically:  $x$  is more central to  $y$  than  $z$  insofar as it grounds  $y$  to a greater degree. The overall shape of your life, say, is grounded in both your love for your partner and your aversion to toads. But the former grounds it to a greater degree, and so is more central to it.<sup>12</sup> You're more intimately connected to a value insofar as things more central to your life are manifest in things more central to the value, or vice versa.

One might wonder *why* contact with value makes a thing personally significant to you. We think that some values concern you especially, and insofar as they do, you should care especially about them. And we think our notion of contact provides a good, intuitive, explication of what it is for a value to 'concern' you. But we don't think there's any deeper metaphysical explanation of the Contact Account than this. We take the account to state a fundamental fact, a place in the normative universe where the spade is turned. Our main evidence for it, however, is abductive: it rests on how well the account explains cases. So let's now see how the Contact Account illuminates our initial examples.

#### 4. People, objects and projects

Consider the case of your neighbor Lynn. It's bad for her that she's overwhelmed by the situation. Part of what grounds this badness, say, is that she's such a compassionate, selfless and caring person. She has a strong desire that the people

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<sup>12</sup> The idea that grounding comes in degrees has not yet been explored in the literature. But it seems very intuitive. Also, it's quotidian to analogize grounding to causation (see e.g. Fine 2012), and causation clearly comes in degrees. So we see this lack of exploration as a shortcoming in the literature rather than the idea.

around her fare well. If she didn't have this desire—if she was more insouciant about Rachel's bed-riddenness, or about the sorrows and woes of their children—her situation would not affect her so deeply. It would not be as bad for her. Lynn's concern for others can be understood in terms of dispositions: she's strongly disposed to empathize with other people and help them when she sees they're in need. And these dispositions are manifest in your current life. Your business is afloat today because of the money she lent you. You've got through many a difficult night, and are now more serene than you have been, due to her emotional support. You stand in a relationship of trust and mutual dependability with her precisely because she's so generous, warm and considerate. So the fact that Lynn's troubles are bad for her is manifest in your current life. Hence, it's significant to you: you should care about it especially. So in virtue of your relationship to Lynn, you should empathize especially with her struggles, and be extra motivated to support her.

But Lynn's general benevolent nature might be only a part of the overall story. Perhaps some more specific dispositions of her are manifest in your life too. Consider her desire to improve the welfare of her children, say: her disposition to help *them* when she sees they're in need, to ask others for support in this, get emotional about their welfare when it's brought up in conversation, et cetera. These more specific dispositions too will partly ground the badness of her situation. And perhaps they're also manifest in your life. Perhaps you're currently lacking your cake-pan, as Lynn borrowed it for her daughter's birthday. Perhaps you have many memories of looking after these children when Lynn asked you to. Or you have a vivid image of her as a concerned mother, because she often got so emotional about it. In addition, perhaps you stand in some active contact with her predicament as well. Perhaps part of what grounds the badness of her situation is that they're currently a little short of money. And perhaps this fact manifests your readiness to accept favors from others: you accepted their loan, even though they were low on funds themselves. The general point is simple. The more of your life you have shared with Lynn, the more of her life she has shared with you, the more you'll be in contact with the value of her life, or the badness of her current plight. Your interactions constitute a web of mutual manifestation relations. And this gives you especially weighty reasons to care about Lynn's troubles.

A similar story also goes for other interpersonal relationships. Consider relationships between children and parents. Usually, parents' valuable properties are manifest in valuable parts of their children's lives and vice versa. A parent's concern for their offspring is manifest in that child's flourishing. The child's flourishing is manifest in their parent's joy. Their need for care is manifest in the parent's loving attention and the loving attention is manifest in the child's

emotional development.<sup>13</sup> Something similar is true of good friendships. Friends' valuable properties are manifest in valuable parts of their lives. Your friend takes joy from your conversational acumen. You get pleasure from their sharp wit. They profit from your stout dependability. You benefit from their empathy. You have disclosed your inner life to them and they have opened themselves up to you. More generally, when you have a special relationship to someone, you're especially in touch with their value and they're especially in touch with yours. That's why you should care more about your nearest and dearest than about people more distant from you.

Now let's see how this applies to objects and projects. Think about your childhood home. The fact that this house might be demolished is bad. Part of what grounds this badness is that the house had certain dispositions: it was disposed to make people feel at home in it, to make them love the place or have fond memories of it. Your love for that house and your memories of growing up in it manifest these dispositions. In contrast, none of your memories or feelings manifest the value of houses on the other side of the planet. So the threat to your house is especially significant to you. You should be especially moved by it, and perhaps try especially hard to stop your home's demolition. Here too, the point generalizes. The value of your dearest things—your treasured bicycle, that magnificent island where you spent many a summer, the tradition of Klezmer music of which you're so fond—will be manifest in your life. You have extra reason to care about them.

Similar points apply to your failed mathematical proof. Part of what grounds the regretability of this failure is that, apart from the lapse in that lemma, the work was excellent. This excellence manifests your intelligence, creativity and patience: you're disposed to do excellent work in mathematics, and your proof manifests that. In contrast, the proofs of your colleagues manifest their creativity rather than yours. So the waste of your work is especially significant to you. You should regret it more than you regret other failures, and perhaps try especially hard to save what can still be saved. And again, the point seems to generalize. You will be manifest in the value of your projects—your own Klezmer band, your five-person family, or the shared striving for justice in your country to which you contribute a tiny bit. So you'll be in close contact with the value of all of these projects, and have extra reason to care about them.

These different domains of personal significance do differ somewhat. Relationships with people, for example, give rise to moral reasons whereas those with objects usually do not. Fortunately, the Contact Account can also respect these differences. The key point here is that different domains are associated with

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<sup>13</sup> For some related points, see Brighthouse and Swift (2009, 53–54).

different kinds of value. People have moral value: their lives have moral import, their autonomy has moral weight, their virtues have moral worth. But objects and projects are less thoroughly infused with morality. Your projects typically have prudential value: the success of your proof would be prudentially good for you. Some objects have aesthetic value: your home might have been elegant, graceful or stunning. Moral value gives rise to moral reasons, but other sorts of value generate non-moral reasons. Thus, contact with the value of people will intensify the weight of moral reasons while that with the value of objects and projects will be more likely to intensify the weight of prudential or aesthetic reasons.

The Contact Account, then, gives us a unified, general explanation of our initial cases of personal significance while respecting the differences between them. This provides a strong (abductive) argument for the view.

## 5. Beyond the core cases

Plausibly, the more explanatorily powerful a view is, the more seriously we should take it. So we now turn to how the Contact Account can illuminate some phenomena that go beyond our initial cases of personal significance. We'll start with a case of chosen attachment. Suppose you become attached to your local football team. You come to deeply value its victory, to admire its sporting prowess. This, it seems, can make it appropriate to care more about the team than rival teams. And this phenomenon is common: often we choose what to care about, and the ensuing care is perfectly appropriate. The Contact Account has a straightforward explanation of this. Typically, a characteristic manifestation of value is a certain kind of valuing. Your team's sporting prowess is a disposition that manifests itself in people's admiration. When you admire your team, you are in contact with that value. Likewise, when you take joy in your team's victory, you are in contact with the goodness of that victory. Positively appraising a good will, typically, manifest that good. The Contact Account can, then, explain quite generally how we're able to choose our attachments. The crucial point is simply that contact with value needn't always be objective: it can be subjective, in the sense that it can consist in your own attitudes towards that value.

Let's consider a second case. Suppose you have just had a daughter. You should care immensely about them. Indeed, you should care more about them than you care about even your old friends. Yet your friend's good qualities might seem more manifest in your life than that of your newborn daughter. Your daughter has only been alive a few hours: she hasn't, one might think, had time to manifest her virtues in your life. Nonetheless, the Contact Account can explain why you should care more about your newborn daughter than about your longtime friends. For a start, you can choose your attachments. When you value your child's innocence

or care about their vulnerability that puts you in contact with their innocence and vulnerability. Valuing your child puts you in contact with their value. Additionally, your child's value might not yet be much manifest in your life, but you are manifest in the child's life. You created the child and helped sustain it through pregnancy. This puts you in contact with the valuable features of your newborn, and that is why you should care about them especially. Contact with value is not only passive, but also active. Such active contact with value, we suspect, explains the significance of biological descent.

Let's turn to a third phenomenon. We've focused on cases of positive partiality: when you have reason to feel positively towards someone or something because of your special relationship with it. But there are also cases of negative partiality.<sup>14</sup> Imagine you have an enemy who has undermined you at every turn. They have cruelly trashed your work, wantonly broken up your relationships and maliciously frustrated your goals. You need care far less about your enemy's flourishing than that of a stranger. Indeed, perhaps it is appropriate to hope your enemy's life goes badly. Again, the Contact Account explains this elegantly. The fact that someone is cruel and malicious is a negative desert base: it makes it good for that person's life to go badly, or at least undercuts the goodness of it going well. When someone is cruel to you, you are in contact with their cruelty. Hence, you have especially weighty reason to want their life to go badly. You have reason to want your enemy's life to go badly (or temper your desire that it go well) because you are in contact with their vices. More generally, negative partiality arises when you're in contact with someone's bad features. These features warrant negative rather than positive responses.

We'll end with a fourth case. The Contact Account, we've argued, can explain both positive and negative partiality. But some relations give rise to no duties of partiality at all. Consider hair or skin color. The fact that you share the same hair color with a stranger doesn't give you any reason to care about them especially. The fact that you have the same skin color as someone else also gives you no reason to be partial to them. The Contact Account explains this straightforwardly. Sharing hair color with someone is not a way to be in contact with their good qualities. The fact that you are both natural brunettes doesn't make their value manifest in your life or vice versa. And so, according to the Contact Account, shared hair color does not underpin duties of partiality. This point clearly generalizes to skin color. We think it generalizes to all cases in which sharing a feature with someone doesn't mean you should care about them especially.

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<sup>14</sup> For an illuminating recent discussion of negative partiality, see Brandt (2020).

The Contact Account, then, provides an elegant, unified explanation of precisely those cases we should want an account of personal significance to explain. This explanatory power speaks strongly in the account's favor.

## 6. Gratitude and compensation

We've seen how the Contact Account can explain some clear cases of personal significance. We now turn to some novel cases. These cases are not, on the surface, standard examples of special relationships. But one of the virtues of the Contact Account is that it lets us understand such cases in relational terms. The Contact Account, so to speak, lets us expand the circle of partiality: it lets us understand more phenomena as examples of personal significance than we could without it. In this section, we explain how gratitude and compensation can be understood as kinds of partiality. The ability of the Contact Account to facilitate such an understanding is part of the abductive argument for it.

We'll begin with gratitude. When someone benevolently benefits you, you should be grateful. This means, in part, that you should care especially about them doing well: you should be extra moved if they're doing badly, say, and extra motivated to help them out when you can. Here's how the Contact Account can explain this. Your benefactor's life is valuable: it's good if they're doing well, and bad if they're doing badly. This value-fact generally gives rise to reasons: it's appropriate to hope that your benefactor does well, and help them out if we can. Now, part of why your benefactor's life is valuable in this way is that they're virtuous: it's good for the virtuous to be doing well, and bad for them to be doing badly. And the fact that your benefactor is virtuous is manifest in your life: you're a little better off due to the fact that they helped you. So, the value of their life is significant to you: you should be especially emotionally involved in how they are doing, and have special reason to do them a little good. Reasons of gratitude, then, arise from contact with value. They arise when someone's virtue is manifest in your life.

Now we turn to compensation. Sometimes, regrettably, we wrong others. We fail to respect their claims. Plausibly, we should care more about our own wrongdoings than about the wrongdoings of other people. If you stole someone's car, you should be more troubled by this injustice than by similar thefts committed by strangers. And you have stronger reasons to compensate your victim than you have to compensate similar victims of others. Here's how the Contact Account can explain this. That your victim is unjustly lacking her car is a value-fact: it makes it appropriate to feel sorry for them, and give them their car if we can. Moreover, this fact manifests your dispositions: your lack of concern for property rights, say, is your disposition to wrongfully appropriate others' possessions, and the fact that your victim is unjustly lacking their car is a manifestation precisely of that. So, you

should care especially about this fact. You have extra reason to feel sorry for them, and hand them back their car. Reasons of reparation, then, arise from contact with value. They arise when your lack of moral concern is manifest in a wrongdoing.

These two cases raise a question. We say that, according to the Contact Account, you have extra reason to help those you should compensate or show gratitude. But, intuitively, you don't merely have reason to help such people: you have a *duty* to help them. You owe them gratitude or compensation. How do we get from reasons to this duty? Such a question also arises in the core cases of special relationships. It's not just that we have special reason to care for our friends or children: we have an obligation to care for them. How do we get obligations out of such reasons? This question, clearly, can be asked of anybody who takes a reasons-first approach to ethics.<sup>15</sup> It's not one only the Contact Account faces. A standard answer to it understands duties in terms of the relative weight of different reasons. You have a duty to do something, roughly, when you have weightier moral reason to do that thing than reason to do anything else. We endorse this answer. Thus, contact with value gives you duties or obligations when it intensifies the weight of your moral reasons to do something to such an extent that they outweigh your reasons to do otherwise.

## 7. Discounting

Let's further strengthen the case for the Contact Account by applying it to some cases of non-moral normativity—i.e., different cases of discounting. A familiar example is future-discounting: generally, we care less about things the more distant they are in the future. You're more excited about your trip to Mexico next week than about your trip to the Vatican in fifty years. You save more money now to spend on tomorrow's mole and Mayan ruins than you save to spend on far-off pizza and papal residencies. Past-discounting is less discussed, but just as familiar: generally, we care less about things the more distant they are in the past. When a relative dies, or you're deeply wronged, or one of your hopes is thwarted, you first feel intense grief, anger, disappointment, and are motivated to do a lot about it. But then the intensity of your emotions wanes, and you're no longer thus inclined to act.<sup>16</sup> This, it seems, is as it should be. It's bizarre to care as much about a trip in fifty years as about one that starts next week. It's pathological to care unabated about past losses, injustices or disappointments without regard for the passage of time. The Contact Account can vindicate these phenomena too. It can let us understand these phenomena, too, as kinds of partiality.

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<sup>15</sup> We take this approach to stem from Parfit (1984).

<sup>16</sup> For prior discussion of this, see Marušić (2018), Callard (2017) and Na'aman (2021).



Let us first see this with future-discounting. Recall that on the Contact Account, what matters is whether your *current* life is manifest in a fact or a fact manifest in your *current* life. Thus consider your near future. Many of your current dispositions will be manifest in the value of your upcoming weeks. The value of your Mexico trip will be grounded in the hikes and dives and parties you'll do. And these will manifest your current adventurousness, impetuosity or celebratory mood. So you should care a lot about them. Your far future may still manifest some of your current dispositions. The value of that distant Vatican trip might partly be grounded in your great future understanding of Renaissance art. And that understanding might be a distant manifestation of the curiosity that characterizes you already now. But you'll change over time, lose many of your current dispositions, and acquire new ones instead. Generally, fewer of your current dispositions will be manifest in things the more distant they are in the 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 many ways. It is manifest in all the absences that they leave: in the conversations gone silent with their demise, the chess games for which you now lack a partner. You have yet to fill the void in your life that their departure is disposed to cause. It is also manifest in your emotional response: you currently feel an extreme grief and sense of loss. And this itself is a manifestation of the terrible tragedy of this death. But both of these things will wane over time: you get other friends, have other conversations and different chess partners. You think of their departure less and less and feel less intensely the pain of their loss. Generally, fewer dispositions related to a value-fact will be manifest in your life the more distantly that fact lies in the past. So you should care about the near past more. And that is just to vindicate past-discounting.

Finally, let's turn to a different, less familiar phenomenon: modal discounting. We treat close and remote possibilities differently. Imagine 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 and are spinning out of control. You slam down on the brakes and only narrowly avoid a crash. You could have died. Now of course, every time you get in your car you could in principle die. But you care more about the modal fact when you narrowly avoid death than when death was only a remote option. More generally, 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 those of remote ones are not. Consider the fact that you could have died on your way home from work. When you almost died, many of the grounds of this fact are manifest in your life. The slipperiness of the road is manifest in your uncontrolled steering. The fogginess of the night is manifest in your hazy vision. The other car's causal powers are manifest in that guardrail near you being destroyed. When you weren't at all close to dying, few grounds of the fact that you could have died are manifest in your life. Perhaps the facts that there were other drivers on the road, or that you don't have lightning reactions or an invulnerable body are manifest in your life. But these facts will be manifest in your life in the former case too. Thus, you're more in touch with the close possibility than the remote one. You should care about it more. And this just is to explain modal discounting.

In sum, the Contact Account has a very wide range of application. It explains the personal significance of people, objects and projects. It explains the reasons that arise from gratitude and compensation. And it explains our reasons for temporal and modal discounting. All are assimilated to a kind of partiality. This is our master argument for the Contact Account. Explanatorily speaking, it is enormously powerful. Any view which explains such a wide swathe of ethical phenomena is worth taking seriously indeed.

## 8. A conjecture

The fact that contact with value can explain all of these kinds of reasons raises a more radical question. Could it be that *whenever* you have reason to care about something, that's because you're in touch with that thing's goodness or badness? In other words, could *all* reasons for attitude and action ultimately arise from such contact with value? We now consider the conjecture that the answer to this question is "yes". The view that goes with this conjecture is that the overall strength of the reasons that a value-fact gives you is given by how much contact you have with the fact multiplied by how valuable that fact is. If you have zero contact with a value-fact, then you won't have any reasons to respond to it in your attitudes or actions. When contact is understood in terms of manifestation, the conjecture says that all your reasons for attitude and action arise from the manifestation of a value-fact in your current life, or from your current life being manifest in a value-fact. Now this is a conjecture: we're not sure that it is true. But it is a marvelously simple and unified account of our reasons, and we think it can be defended surprisingly well. In this section, we outline that defense.

The main worry about the conjecture, we think, is that it doesn't generate enough reasons: that we have more reasons than those provided through contact with

value. Here are three related forms that this general worry might take. To begin with, one might think that the conjecture implies a kind of conservatism: it seems to say you should stick to old and familiar goods, rather than explore new forms of value and worth. Imagine, for example, that you've never been to the opera. So you have little contact with the value of this form of art. The conjecture seems to say you therefore have no reason to go to the opera. But that seems wrong: even if, or indeed precisely because you've never been to the opera, you have weighty reason to go. Similarly, if you've never watched football, played poker, or gone mountaineering you'll have little contact with the value of these things. The conjecture seems to say you have little reason to explore them. But this is too reactionary. We have weighty reason to explore new goods.

Additionally, one might worry that the conjecture is too parochial: it seems to imply that you shouldn't care about causally distant things. Suppose there's a terrible famine in Bengal: millions of people are stricken by hunger, thousands of them die. One might think you're not at all in touch with the tragedy of these distant deaths. So our conjecture seems to imply that you needn't care about them at all. But that seems overly parochial. To some extent at least, you should grieve these deaths, and work to alleviate the famine. More generally, to some extent, you should care about values wherever they occur—not just about those in your rough causal vicinity.

Relatedly again, one might think the conjecture is much too libertine: it seems to say you should be indifferent towards bads that have not yet materialized, rather than try to prevent them from coming into existence. Imagine, for example, that you punch a stranger. Before punching them, you were not in close contact with anything about them. In particular, you weren't in close contact with the badness of their broken nose. After all, their nose was still fine back then. So the conjecture seems to say you had no reason to avoid the assault. But that's wrong: you had a weighty reason not to punch them—a simple reason of non-maleficence. Similarly, before insulting a bystander, vandalizing a painting, polluting a river, you may have had little contact with the badness of these things. The conjecture seems to say you had little reason not to bring them about. But this is too permissive. We have weighty reason not to bring about new bads.

We think there's a good reply to these worries. Essentially, there's a surprisingly broad range of value-facts and kinds of contact, and so the Contact Account will generate more reasons than the objection assumes. We'll point out three pertinent ideas. First, certain *modal facts* are value-facts in our sense. Suppose you've never been to the opera. In this case, presumably, it *would* be good if you went. This modal fact itself warrants certain affective and practical responses: it makes it appropriate for you to desire to go to the opera, to buy tickets for *the Magic Flute* tonight, and look forward to going. So it's a value-fact in our sense. Moreover,

you're in contact with it. The fact that it would be good if you went to the opera is, in part, grounded in certain of your dispositions. Perhaps your mind is unduly narrow, your aesthetic or emotional horizon unduly constrained, partly because you don't know Mozart, Wagner and Verdi. And it's precisely because of this—because you are now disposed to be blind to opera's beauty, less fully virtuous or open-minded than you could be—that it would be good if you went. These dispositions will be manifest in your current life: in your narrow-minded beliefs, desires and projects. So, you're in touch with the fact that it would be good if you went to the opera, and thus have a reason to go. More generally, even if the conjecture is true, we can explain why precisely your lack of contact with a value might mean you have a reason to explore it.

Second, *epistemic contact* is a type of contact. Consider, for instance, the badness of a death in Bengal. Suppose you know that that person died, and that this is objectively bad. This will put you in some contact with that badness. That's because the badness grounds a disposition: the death is disposed to create knowledge of its badness precisely because it is bad. And this disposition is manifest in your knowledge: you know of the badness of the death precisely because it is bad, and disposed to create such knowledge. So, you're in some contact with the fact that this death is bad. More generally, whenever you know about a value-fact, you are in some contact with it. And knowledge may not be the only kind of epistemic contact. Perhaps understanding is a kind of such contact. Perhaps certain types of justification are too. So the conjecture allows us to say that you should care about value-facts wherever they occur, provided that you know or understand or have evidence of them.

Third, you may often be in contact with value-facts that take the form of *general principles*, principles such as 'It's a law that all Gs are good.' Think about the general principle that all undeserved pain is bad. This principle is a value-fact in our sense: it warrants certain affective and practical responses. It makes it appropriate for us to regret *all* undeserved pain, to want it to end, or work towards its ending if we can. Now you yourself have had undeserved pain. The badness of these instances of pain grounds certain dispositions of you: your disposition to avoid future undeserved pains, say. These dispositions are manifest in your current life: in your savings for a pleasant pension, say. And the principle that all undeserved pain is bad grounds the badness of your undeserved pains. So you're in contact with the principle. That gives you reason to want to end undeserved pain. For instance, it gives you reason not to punch people in the nose. More generally, once you've experienced certain instances of a type of value, you'll often have some reason to care about all instances of this kind. So even if the conjecture is true, we'll often have important reasons not to bring about new bads.

In short, there are many different kinds of contact, and many diverse types of value-facts. Thus, we think the conjecture can be defended rather well from the most serious objections to it. It may well be true that all practical and affective reasons should be understood in terms of contact with value. All such reasons, ultimately, may arise from a special kind of relationship.

## 9. Conclusion

In the *Republic*, Plato proposed that we should unshackle our chains, walk out of the Cave, and stare squarely at the shining light of goodness (514a–520a). In the *Symposium*, he suggested that we should follow the sweet call of eros, and fruitfully produce, engender or beget good things (206a–212a). The best life, he suggested, was the life in passive and active contact with the good. Our view is reminiscent of Plato's. We too think that contact with value matters. But we think it matters beyond questions of the good life. Whether or not touching goodness is good for you: you should care especially about something when you're in contact with its value. Yet, 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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