

The Good Life as the Life in Touch with the Good

Abstract. What is it that makes your life go well for you? In this paper, we give an account of welfare. Our core idea is simple. There are impersonally good or bad things out there: things that are good or bad period, not (or not only) good or bad *for* someone. The life that is good for you is the life in contact with the good. We'll understand the relevant notion of 'contact' here in terms of manifestation: you're in contact with a value either when it is manifest in parts of your life or parts of your life are manifest in it. So, the more the good is manifest in your life, or your life manifest in the good, the better for you. The more the bad is manifest in your life, or your life manifest in the bad, the worse for you. We'll argue that this account is extensionally adequate: it explains the welfare value of achievements, friendships, knowledge, pleasures and virtues. Moreover, it has a number of explanatory virtues: it's unified, elegant and explanatorily powerful. So, we'll suggest, it's an excellent account of welfare, and in many ways superior to its main competitors.

Keywords. Welfare • Hedonism • Desire satisfactionism • Objective list theories • Hybrid theories

1. Introduction

Imagine you spend a weekend in the mountains with a friend. You hike around snow-capped peaks, see rivers spill into valleys and kestrels pierce the sky. You're enchanted by nature's majesty. The trek was carefully planned, and the route is arduous. Completing it is quite the achievement. And the trip deepens the relationship between you two. You tell your friend about your hopes and fears. They respond with comforting empathy. They tell you about their new research. Your intellectual horizons are expanded. You share convivial conversation and laugh late into each night. At the end of your hike, you wish other people could experience the same. So you donate some money to maintain the trails in the region. On your journey home you're elated: you feel those days were the very stuff out of which the good life is made. And intuitively, you are right: this mountain trip was good for you. But why was it? In virtue of what did you benefit from these vistas, conversations, exertions? More generally, what is it that makes your life go well for you?

In this paper we provide an account of the good life: of the life that goes well for you, or the life high in welfare. Let's clarify what we mean by this.¹ Welfare, as we mean it, is best nailed down by its connections to attitudes and actions. It plays a critical role in determining the fittingness of certain attitudes. We should pity or feel sympathy for you if you're doing badly, and be pleased for you if you're doing well (Rønnow-Rasmussen 2007; Hooker 2015; Fuchs 2018). We should feel the desirability of a life high in welfare, and the undesirability of a life low in it (Campbell 2013). Welfare also plays a critical role in determining the reasonableness of certain actions. We have prudential reason to do what will increase our welfare and avoid doing what will decrease it (Bramble 2016b, 86; Heathwood 2005, 496; Zimmerman 2009). Insofar as we care about someone else, we have reason to promote their welfare too (Darwall 2002). Welfare, then, is tied up with the fittingness of certain attitudes and with a particular class of practical reasons. Our aim is to give an account of welfare in this sense.

What is it to give such an account? First and foremost, an account of welfare must include an account of basic welfare goods and bads. A basic welfare good fundamentally contributes to your welfare; a basic welfare bad fundamentally detracts from it.² And the dependence here is explanatory: your having the level of welfare you do is ultimately grounded by your having the basic welfare goods and bads you do. An account of welfare must give us an account of such goods and bads: it must tell us what kinds of things fundamentally benefit or harm you. And it must also include an account of how the basic goods and bads you have determine your overall welfare: it must tell us what it is to have more or less of these goods and bads; how the quantities of each good and bad contribute to your welfare; and how the welfare contributions of different goods and bads compare to each other. Our aim is to provide such an account.

The account we'll defend develops a simple idea. There are impersonally good or bad things in the universe out there: things that are good or bad period, not (or not only) good or bad *for* someone. And the life that is good for you is the life in touch with the good: it's good for you to be in contact with impersonally good things, and bad for you to be in contact with impersonally bad things. In some form or other, this rough idea has been very popular in Western philosophy. Plato thought that the best life is the life contemplating the Form of the Good (*Republic*, 514a-520a). Augustine believed that the good life is the life in appropriate love with the goods—and especially, with the ultimate good, God (see esp. *City of God*, XV.22). Thomas Aquinas claimed that our happiness consists in the vision of that good (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II. 3.8). And the idea also appears in many contemporary accounts—such as Kagan's claim that welfare consists in enjoying the good (2009) or Darwall's view that welfare consists in appreciating the good (2002). These accounts involve different understandings of what the 'good' is and what 'contact' with it amounts to. But they all say, roughly, that the good life is the life in touch with the good.

¹ For an overview of the discussion on the notion of welfare, see Campbell (2016).

² For the importance and difficulty of accounting for welfare bads, see Kagan (2015). For further discussion, see Tully (2017).

We think this general idea is promising. But we find none of these interpretations of it entirely successful. So we'll offer a novel one. We'll understand the relevant contact in terms of manifestation: you're in contact with a value either when it is manifest in parts of your life or parts of your life are manifest in it. So the more the good is manifest in your life, or your life manifest in the good, the better for you. The more the bad is manifest in your life, or your life manifest in the bad, the worse for you. Consider, for example, your weekend in the mountains. The land's beauty was manifest in your enchantment. Your friend's empathy was manifest in your contentedness. Your perseverance was manifest in your completing that hike. This put you in touch with impersonal goods: beauty, empathy, success. And this, we suggest, is why your trip was good for you.

We'll call this the Contact Account of welfare. In the rest of the paper, we'll explain and defend it. In section 3 we'll provide a detailed statement of it. In section 4 we'll argue that the account is extensionally adequate: it can capture everything that's intuitively good or bad for you. In particular, it explains the personal value of achievements, friendships, knowledge, pleasures and virtues. In section 5 we'll argue that the account has a number of explanatory virtues. In particular, it's unified, elegant and explanatorily powerful. In section 6 we'll look at a salient objection to the account, and argue that it can be answered. In short, we'll suggest not only that the Contact Account is the best interpretation of the idea that the good life is the life in touch with the good. We'll suggest that it's generally an excellent account of welfare—in many ways superior to its competitors. But before we get to these arguments, let's provide an intuitive motivation for our view: let's set the stage, and try to get you in the mood for thinking about welfare along our lines.

2. Goodness and Contact

Consider first how to understand the impersonal 'good', with which the good life is in contact. We won't interpret this as some Platonic Form or a supreme Christian God. We prefer a more flat-footed understanding. As we'll understand it, the awesomeness of a rainforest, the beauty of a painting, the elegance of an animal are all impersonally good. The destruction of an ecosystem, the ugliness of a building, the breaking of a promise are all impersonally bad. They're impersonally good or bad in the sense that they're good or bad period—not (or not only) good or bad *for* someone. We'll understand this goodness and badness in terms of warranted responses. Some actions, emotions, desires, intentions, and forms of deliberation are warranted for anyone whatsoever in response to certain things. Protecting the Grand Canyon is warranted in this way. Perhaps destroying the Tour Maine-Montparnasse is also warranted. Some such responses, such as protection, admiration or awe, are positive. Some, such as destruction, regret or contempt, are negative. As we'll understand it, for something to be impersonally good is for it to warrant a positive response from anybody. For something to be impersonally bad is

for it to warrant a negative response from anybody.³ The Hagia Sophia's beauty warrants awe from all. Thus it's impersonally good. The Exxon Valdez disaster warrants universal regret. Thus it's impersonally bad. To be more precise, we'll assume it's only property instantiations, or facts, that can be impersonally good or bad. When a fact is either good or bad, we'll say it's a value-fact. We simply assume that the universe contains many value-facts in this sense.

Now consider how to understand the 'contact' which the good life has with the good. Start with a generic version of how this has been interpreted so far: the view on which contact with the good consists in *appreciation* of it—in a pleased experience of the good as good. In some rough sense, Plato's 'contemplation', Augustine's 'love', Aquinas's 'vision', as well as Kagan's 'enjoyment' and Darwall's 'appreciation' are all interpretable as forms of such an experience. We think this notion of contact suffers from a simple problem: it seems overly passive. Your purposefully *doing* good seems to benefit you above and beyond your appreciation of it. Take Leonardo's Last Supper. Intuitively, the sheer fact that Leonardo painted this timeless masterpiece contributes to his welfare: it makes it fitting to be pleased for his sake or to desire to be in his shoes. And the benefit he gets from this piece of agency is something that you don't (or he himself doesn't) get from merely appreciating that painting once it is there—or from appreciating his act of painting it, or the fact that he produced it, or whatever. There's a *sui generis* benefit in the sheer act of masterfully producing such beauty. Something similar seems true for other goods. It seems in itself good for you to actively benefit others, not just to appreciate that they're well off or that someone helps them. It seems in itself good for you to increase the knowledge of humanity, not just to appreciate the value of what we know or the fact that someone added some knowledge to it. The present view seems unable to accommodate this simple fact.

In response to this intuition, one might be tempted to extend this generic idea. One might say there are two ways to get in touch with value: either to appreciate something valuable, or to purposefully produce it. This yields an account of welfare that's sensitive to the import of active production. But this view still faces problems. To begin with, it employs a thoroughly disjunctive account of contact. Appreciation and purposeful production might be contingently connected: people often bring about values they appreciate or appreciate values they bring about. But these relations aren't connected in any deeper way. In this sense, the present account is disunified. And while this doesn't mean the account *must* be false, it's still a drawback. Other things equal, it's preferable to have a unified notion of contact. But in addition, the view still seems extensionally amiss: both its active and its passive tenet still seem overly narrow. On the one hand, you can bring about values, and benefit or suffer from this, even if you didn't purposefully or intentionally produce these values. Suppose you're a bomber pilot. You intended to hit the arms factory, but recklessly annihilated the civil hospital next to it. It seems bad for you to have caused these deaths. The present account can't explain this. On the other hand, you

³ Alternatively, one might think the fact that something is impersonally valuable *grounds* the fact that a certain response towards it is warranted (or vice versa). This makes impersonal value more fundamental than fitting responses (or vice versa). Such an order of fundamentality would leave our view essentially unchanged.

can be passively affected by a value, and benefitted or harmed by it, even if you fail to appreciate that value. Suppose when you were an infant, a stranger heroically rescued you from a fire. But no one ever told you, and thus you never appreciate their selfless act of benevolence. Intuitively, we think, that you were the object of their virtue still seems in itself good for you. Again, the present account seems unable to capture this.

A straightforward way to unify the passive and active tenets of this theory, and to make them more inclusive, would be to invoke causality. We might say you're in contact with a value-fact p simply to the extent that p has a causal impact on you, or you have a causal impact on p . This view can explain how you were harmed by causing these deaths or benefitted from that stranger's virtue: both events involved causal connections between you and a value. However, the view now seems overly broad. Suppose someone in Ancient Rome caused a chariot accident: two people administering first aid fell in love, later founded a family, and Leonardo was one of their distant descendants. The person who caused that accident was a chief causal contributor to the Last Supper: if it weren't for them, the artwork would never have been painted. But the beauty of the painting doesn't seem to benefit that person: their life wouldn't have been worse for them, say, if Leonardo had screwed it up. More generally, mere causal connections often seem too contingent. If anything, it's a more internal or non-accidental connection to value that constitutes a basic welfare good.

In short, *prima facie*, we want an account of contact that's both active and passive, but not disunified, and less inclusive than mere causality. We think the relation of manifestation fits this bill: value-facts can be manifest in parts of your life and parts of your life can be manifest in value-facts; and *that's* what it is for you to be in contact with value. The beauty of Leonardo's Last Supper is manifest in people's appreciation of it. That's why sensitive art lovers benefit from it. Equally, Leonardo's great talents are manifest in his painting. That's how he benefits from it in addition. But while the recklessness of that Ancient Roman may have partly caused the Last Supper, it isn't *manifest* in the beauty of that painting. So the relation of manifestation promises to provide a unified relation covering both active and passive contact while being properly non-incident. Let's explore this idea in more detail.

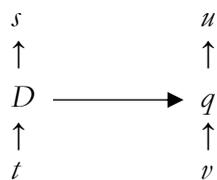
3. The Contact Account

How shall we understand the notion of manifestation? We think a good account proceeds in terms of dispositions: manifestation is the relationship in which a disposition stands to what happens when it is activated.⁴ Consider the flammability of gasoline. This is the disposition to set on fire when heated up. When you put a match to gasoline and it sets alight, its being on fire manifests its flammability. Now perhaps you burnt a house with that gasoline, and were thus later arrested for arson.

⁴ Dispositions are often understood in terms of counterfactuals, as e.g. in Lewis (1997). For a discussion of such accounts, see Cross (2012).

Your being in jail was caused by the gasoline’s flammability, but doesn’t manifest it. Flammability isn’t the disposition to cause jail time for arsonists. It’s the disposition to cause fire. So only the fire manifests the flammability. Thus can dispositions be manifest. At a rough approximation, when your dispositions are manifest in a value, or a value’s dispositions are manifest in your life, we’ll say you’re in contact with it.

But that’s only a rough approximation. To be more precise, we need to distinguish two notions of manifestation. The example above picks out a narrow sense of manifestation. We’ll henceforth denote this as ‘manifestation_n’. Only dispositions are manifest in this narrow sense. Let D be a disposition of the form ‘if p then q ’. We’ll say that q manifests_n D if and only if q is the case because of p and D . We want to use manifestation_n to carve out a broader notion of manifestation. To do so, we need the notion of a ground-theoretic connection.⁵ We’ll say that p is ground-theoretically connected to q if and only if p grounds q or q grounds p . The fact that Mary is kind, for instance, grounds the fact that she’s virtuous. So these two facts are ground-theoretically connected. In contrast, the fact that Mary is kind doesn’t ground, and isn’t grounded by, the fact that Bogotá is the capital of Colombia. So these two facts aren’t so connected. We now define the broader sense of manifestation thus: q manifests (without subscript) p if and only if q or something ground-theoretically connected to q manifests_n p or something ground-theoretically connected to p . Broad manifestation, then, is manifestation_n extended so as to be indifferent to connections of ground. A little diagram may help to illustrate this notion:



The upward arrows stand for the grounding relation. In this diagram, t grounds disposition D , and D grounds s ; v grounds q , and q grounds u ; and q manifests_n D . So in our broad sense of manifestation, u , q and v manifest s , D and t .

Let’s give two examples to illustrate this. Suppose first you look at a beautiful painting. The fact that the painting is beautiful (t) grounds the fact that if aesthetically sensitive people look at it, they will be pleased (D). Now suppose this disposition of the painting is manifest_n in your pleasure: you are pleased (q), precisely because you’re aesthetically sensitive and looking at this painting. Then, the fact that the painting is beautiful is manifest (in our broad sense) in your pleasure. Alternatively, suppose you yourself paint a beautiful painting. Say the fact that that painting is beautiful (u) is grounded in the fact that its color palette is well-balanced (q). And suppose this fact manifests_n your sensitivity to color: if you paint a painting, its color palette will be well-balanced (D), and the palette of this painting is well-balanced precisely because you painted it and you’re sensitive to color. Then, your color sensitivity is manifest (in our broad sense) in the beauty of this painting.

⁵ For an introduction to grounding, see Fine (2012). The notion of ground we’ll use is partial ground.

We think it's this relation of manifestation which constitutes the relevant contact with value: for you to be in contact with a value-fact p is for some fact in your life to be connected with p through some kind of (broad) manifestation relation. It's either for p to be manifest in a fact in your life, or for some fact in your life to be manifest in p . More precisely, we propose

The Contact Account of Welfare:

1. The only basic welfare good is contact with a good: an impersonal good being manifest in a fact of your life or a fact of your life being manifest in an impersonal good.
2. The only basic welfare bad is contact with a bad: an impersonal bad being manifest in a fact of your life or a fact of your life being manifest in an impersonal bad.
3. Your overall welfare is given by the sum of how much contact with the good you have minus how much contact with the bad you have.

This comprises the elements we suggested an account of welfare consists of: an account of basic goods and bads (the first two clauses), and an account of how they determine your overall welfare (the third clause). Let's now make clearer the notions in this account

First, we need to clarify the notion of 'your life'. As we'll understand it, your life is a collection of facts. It includes all facts about what you ever do, feel, see, believe, desire. Thus, if you raised a child, love snakes or once felt the pain of a broken toe, those facts are part of your life. Your life also includes all the dispositions you ever had. If you were adventurous in your youth, are now circumspect, and will be pusillanimous in old age, those facts are also 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 it.

Next, we need to unpack the third clause of the account. What determines 'how much' you're in contact with value? We think two things do. Suppose you're in contact with something valuable. On the one hand, that thing can be more or less valuable. Say you're appreciating a painting. The painting can be an absolute masterpiece, like Leonardo's Last Supper. Or it can be a decent amateur work by a friend. The former is more valuable than the latter. All else equal, you're in greater contact with the good or the bad when you're in contact with greater goods or bads. On the other hand, you can be in more or less intimate contact with such a thing. Say you were the writer and lead actor of a successful play. Then you are intimately in touch with its value. In contrast, suppose you merely watched the play, or were a second understudy for a minor character. Then you're less intimately in touch with its value. All else equal, you're in greater contact with the good or the bad when you're in more intimate contact with goods or bads. So to determine your overall contact with value, we consider every value you're in contact with, assess how good

or bad it is, and multiply that by how intimately you are in contact with it. The resulting figure tells us how much in contact you are with value.

Let's say more about these two ideas. First, what is it for something to be more or less valuable? It's uncontroversial that values come in degrees: the Last Supper is more beautiful than the amateur painting, a pandemic worse than one man's flu, the injustice of current racism greater than that of a child getting less cake than its sibling. We think our analysis of values above provides a good analysis of this gradability. As we'll understand it, for something to be more or less good or bad is for the responses it's fitting to have about it to be more or less intense. Other things equal, the amount of sorrow it's fitting to feel about a pandemic is greater than that it's fitting to feel about one man's flu. And this means the former is worse than the latter. It should be almost as uncontroversial that we can compare not just instances of the same kind of value, but instances of different values as well. The injustice of current racism is greater than the beauty of the latest Brazil football kit. And again, we can understand this in terms of fitting responses. Other things equal, the emotional resources (anger, sadness, shock) it's fitting to invest vis-à-vis current racism are greater than the resources (appreciation, affection) it's fitting to invest vis-à-vis the Brazil jersey and shorts. This means the disvalue of the racism is greater than the value of the kit.⁶

Second, what determines the intimacy of your contact with a value? We think this can be understood in terms of *centrality*. On the one hand, some things are more central to your life than others: your love for your partner is more central to your life than your aversion to bats. On the other hand, some things are more central to a value than other things: the ingenuity of 'Strawberry Fields Forever' is more central to the magnificence of the Beatles than that of the cover songs they played at their early gigs. 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 bats. But the former grounds it to a greater degree, and so is more central to it.⁷ Now we suggest 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. Notably, this makes the intimacy of your contact commensurable across values as well. We can compare the centrality of various things to your life and to various values. Thus we can say, for instance, that you're more intimately in contact

⁶ We're not claiming that different values are always comparable in this sense. Plausibly, there's often no facts about which fitting responses are at least as strong as which other responses. But equally plausibly, there's often no facts about which values are equally great as which other values. Such incomparability in impersonal values will lead to incomparability in welfare too: often, there won't be any facts about which lives are at least as good for you as which other lives. We think that's independently plausible.

⁷ The idea that grounding comes in degrees has not yet been explored in the literature. But it is very intuitive. The existence of a four-legged table is grounded in greater degree by the existence of the table top and its first three legs than by that of the final leg: the former makes a greater constitutive contribution than the latter. And it's quotidian to analogize grounding to causation (Fine 2012, 40; Schaffer 2016; Wilson 2018), a notion that clearly comes in degrees: one thing can make a greater causal contribution to some event than another. So we see this lack of exploration as a shortcoming in the literature rather than the idea.

with the virtuousness of your son than with the ugliness of some suburb you visited briefly.

The Contact Account says your overall welfare is determined by the ‘sum’ of your contact with the good minus your contact with the bad. Thus we simply determine the measure of your overall contact with the good, and of your overall contact with the bad, in the manner just explained. We detract the latter from the former. The resulting figure tells us how good your life is for you on the whole. That’s the view. Let’s now see why we think this is a good account of welfare.

4. Extensional Adequacy

How should we evaluate an account of welfare? The most important criterion for such an account is its extensional adequacy. We have intuitions about which things make your life better or worse. Other things equal, the more a theory of welfare vindicates these intuitions, the better it is. In this section, we’ll argue that (together with plausible background assumptions) the Contact Account vindicates a broad range of common sense intuitions about welfare.

4.1 *Achievement*

Let us start with achievements. Intuitively, achievements are a cornerstone of the good life: a life full of achievements seems enriched, a life denuded of them impoverished. It is good for you to complete an arduous hike, cure cancer or prove Goldbach’s conjecture, to write a great novel or cook a fine meal.⁸ The Contact Account vindicates this claim. In each of these cases, your achieving something involves your being in active contact with a good. The completion of an arduous hike is a good: it warrants admiration and commendation. But your completion of such a hike manifests_n your dispositions: your strength of will, stamina or sure-footedness. That you’re strong-willed, say, means that if you want something you won’t give up until you have it. And that you’ve completed your hike manifests_n this disposition: you completed it because you wanted to and because when you want something you won’t give up. Thus in completing your hike, you’re manifest in a good. The same is true for other achievements. An elegant proof is a good: it warrants aesthetic appreciation. And the proof will manifest_n your intellectual abilities: your creativity and rigor. Great novels, fine meals and medical cures are all goods. When you produce them, they manifest your eloquence, culinary talents or scientific perseverance. More generally, when you achieve something, you produce a good that manifests your dispositions. Thus achievements benefit you.

The account can also explain why doing difficult bad or pointless things typically doesn’t seem to make your life better.⁹ Suppose you execute an intricate terrorist attack, and kill a thousand people. This might have been very hard to pull

⁸ For an extensive study of the nature and value of achievements, see e.g. Bradford (2015); also Hurka (2015, ch. 5).

⁹ Although for a contrary view, see Bradford (2015, 162–70).

off. But that doesn't make it valuable for you. Or suppose you count the blades of grass on the lawns of Harvard University.¹⁰ This may be anything but easy. But it doesn't seem to contribute to your welfare. The Contact Account can explain this. Your attack puts you in contact with something bad: a thousand deaths. So it actually makes your life worse. Counting blades of grass is of no impersonal value. So it doesn't make your life better. Thus, bringing about a bad or pointless thing is not an achievement in the sense that contributes to welfare.

4.2 *Friendship*

Friendships too seem a key component of the life well-lived. Here we mean friendships broadly to cover most roughly symmetrical, prolonged good relationships between people: relationships involving mutual trust, respect and good will, smaller or greater acts of benevolence, time spent together, and so on. Such relationships benefit you.¹¹ The Contact Account can explain this. In friendships, you're in contact with your friend's valuable properties. On the one hand, your friend's value will be manifest in your life. Their kindness, for instance, is a good. It's also a disposition, to the effect that if they think someone needs help, they'll help them. The many small acts of assistance you receive from them will manifest, this disposition. So they'll put you in contact with the value of their kindness. In a similar manner, your friend's loyalty, wisdom or warmth will be manifest in your trust, understanding or sense of comfort. On the other hand, your dispositions will be manifest in valuable features of your friend. The fact that they've had a wonderful evening, for instance, is a good. It's partly grounded in them having had many good laughs that evening. And this fact in turn manifests, your funniness. So, their laughing puts you in contact with a good. In like manner, your respectfulness and loyalty will be manifest in their self-esteem and sense of being at home with you. Thus friendships put you in contact with the good in your friends' lives.

Let's contrast friendship with enmity: symmetrical relations involving the desire that another person do badly, careful attention to their bad qualities, smaller or greater acts of vindictiveness, and so on. This is a harmful sort of relationship: it makes your life worse to have enemies. And the Contact Account explains this as well. When your enemies harm you, those harms manifest, their vices and character failures. Thus, they put you in contact with your enemies' bad features. Similarly, when you harm your enemies, you put yourself in contact with various bads. They will be badly off, and this will manifest, your vindictiveness or animosity towards them. Thus, on the Contact Account, such enmity is bad for you.

4.3 *Knowledge*

Many people think knowledge is part of the good life. Perhaps this doesn't apply to all knowledge: knowing how many grains of sand there are on Rockaway beach may not benefit you at all. But it applies to important knowledge: learning the fundamental laws of physics or understanding key facts about human psychology or

¹⁰ This example is of course from Rawls (1971, 379).

¹¹ The classic statement of this is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (bks. VIII and IX).

evolution, say, in itself seems to make your life better for you.¹² Again, the Contact Account can explain this. The most straightforward explanation employs the active aspect of contact. Your important knowledge is impersonally valuable: the universe seems a little better, more fittingly the object of admiration, satisfaction and pleasure, because there aren't only flowers and chicken but higher forms of knowing and understanding. But to have such knowledge you must have exercised your epistemic capacities: your capacity for understanding and reasoning, or your attentiveness, thoughtfulness or smartness.¹³ Thus your knowledge manifests, your dispositions. So, when you have important knowledge, you're in contact with something impersonally good.

There's also a second, passive way for knowledge to improve your life. Often, the important facts you know don't leave you entirely cold. You might wonder at the mass-energy equivalence, say: at the beauty of $E=mc^2$. You might think the depth of our subconscious minds, or the fact that we've evolved from single-celled organisms, is astonishing. These attitudes will themselves be manifestations of the wonderfulness of these facts: it's because they are wonderful that they're disposed to make people wonder at them, and your wonder manifests, this disposition. And of course their wonderfulness is a value. So, if you're appropriately moved by the facts that you know, that's another way for you to touch the good.

4.4 *Pleasure*

Plausibly, pleasure generally contributes to welfare: if an experience is pleasant, it usually benefits you. Pain generally detracts from it: if an experience is painful, it usually harms you. Here we're thinking of pleasure and pain as phenomenological states. The intuition is that some phenomenological states (the pleasant ones) are generally good for you, while other such states (the painful ones) are generally bad for you. The Contact Account can explain this. The simplest explanation is that, generally, pleasures are impersonally good and pains impersonally bad: you should generally be pleased by the prospect of a world full of pleasures and displeased by that of a world full of pains. Additionally, pleasures and pains ground all sorts of dispositions. When you're experiencing pleasure, you're disposed to like your situation, and to try and make it persist or seek it again. When you're in pain, you're disposed to dislike your situation, and to escape it now and henceforth.¹⁴ When these dispositions are manifest, in your life—in your actions, likes and dislikes—that puts you in touch with the value of your own sensations. So generally, your feeling pleasure will make your life better while your being in pain will make it worse.¹⁵

¹² For an elaboration and defense of this view, see e.g. Hurka (1993, chs. 8–10; 2015, ch. 4); a classic, extreme instance of this view (with respect to philosophical wisdom in particular) is given in Plato's *Apology* (esp. 38a).

¹³ For a defense of this position, see e.g. Sosa (2007) and Greco (2010).

¹⁴ Mørch (2020, 1082–84) argues for a similar claim. She thinks that pleasures and pain *just are* dispositions. We prefer the position that they *ground* dispositions, but either position is adequate for our story.

¹⁵ The phenomenological account of pleasures we're presupposing here is prominent (see e.g. Kagan 1992; Crisp 2006b; Smuts 2011; Bramble 2013). However, our argument can stand even if there's no

But pleasures and pains can affect your welfare in a second way. Often, they're a constitutive part of fitting responses to other goods and bads. And thus they'll manifest them. Consider the pleasure involved in you laughing at a joke. Your amusement is the fitting response to the funniness of the joke. Thus it manifests that funniness. But your pleasure is a constitutive part of that amusement: you're pleased in virtue of being amused. And if you didn't feel pleased, your guffaw would be a mock laughter or sarcastic expression of contempt. It wouldn't be genuine amusement. So, your pleasure manifests the joke's funniness. And on the Contact Account, that's another reason for why it is good for you. The same goes for your enjoyment of poetry, your delight at a ballet, or your appreciation of a whisky. The poetry is sublime, the ballet beautiful, the whisky well-made. Your pleasure in such things puts you in touch with these values. And thus it is good for you. A parallel point applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to many pains. Pains aren't just bad in themselves. Having them generally also puts you in contact with other bads.

This explanation of the welfare value of pleasures and pains has interesting implications. It means not all pleasures and pains are good or bad for you. Consider the headache of a Stoic. Suppose this headache causes no aversive reaction in them: they don't mind their pain at all. On the Contact Account, this pain isn't bad *for them*. Its disvalue isn't manifest in their life. Or consider pleasures about which you fittingly feel guilty. Suppose you enjoy watching trashy television. But you're appropriately displeased by your own pleasure: you rightly think it's wrong for you to find Love Island so entertaining. On the Contact Account, these pleasures aren't good for you. Indeed, they're positively bad for you, as their ill-fittingness is manifest in your negative appraisal of them. We think all of this is plausible. Pains and pleasures that leave you cold often don't affect your welfare at all. And pains you love can make your life better, while pleasures you disdain can make it worse.

4.5 Virtue

As a final example, let's look at virtue. Intuitively, virtue contributes to the good life.¹⁶ We think this ancient wisdom takes three forms. First, bringing about *good things* is good for you. At least in one respect, it benefits you when you help maintain a valuable trail, save a person from drowning, or distribute mosquito nets. Our account explains this easily. When the trail gets maintained, because of your money, that's valuable. And this maintenance manifests, your generosity. So your donation puts you in contact with a good. Similarly, your courage or charitableness might be manifest in the good of someone being saved or getting a mosquito net. Thus the Contact Account explains why it benefits you to do good. Of course, the opposite is true as well: it will often be bad for you to bring about bad things. If you punch

common phenomenology of pleasures. Plausibly, there is *some* set of sensations that are impersonally valuable and benefit you because of their phenomenology—even if they aren't your 'pleasures'. Our argument goes through for them. If there's no such set of sensations, our argument doesn't go through. But then that's exactly right too: there is no set of sensations that benefit you because of their phenomenology.

¹⁶ For a modern defense of this, see e.g. Hurka (2015, ch. 6); a classic defense of this view is given in Plato's *Republic* (esp. bk. IV).

someone in the nose, their pain will be bad, and manifest your violence. That puts you in touch with a bad.

There's a second aspect to this wisdom. Often, merely doing the *right* thing also seems to make your life better. And that's so independently of whether the right thing is right in virtue of producing good. Suppose you could benefit a colleague by hiding the whiskey they keep in their office. But they don't want you to do so: they say that their drinking is none of your business. And suppose that (even though it would have better consequences) it's wrong to benefit your colleague against their will: such paternalism is disrespectful. Intuitively, if you respect your colleague's decision, your life is a little better for you. Our account can explain this as well. Often, if you act rightly, that itself is of impersonal value in our sense: it warrants a certain form of satisfaction, pleasedness, commendation. And it will be a manifestation_n of your dispositions: your respectfulness and sensitivity, say. So your acting rightly puts you in contact with the good. And again, the reverse holds as well. If you act wrongly, that's bad, and will typically manifest your disrespectfulness, selfishness or rudeness.

Here's a third form of the ancient wisdom. Your being *virtuous* is good for you. Here we understand being virtuous as having fitting attitudes about morally relevant things: feeling compassion with those who suffer, distraught by injustice, pleased about people getting what they deserve, and so on.¹⁷ Our explanation for why such virtue can benefit you is similar again. Your having fitting attitudes is in itself impersonally good: it warrants some admiration, perhaps some commendation or reassurance. And this good will manifest_n your dispositions: your empathy or sense of justice. So again, such virtue puts you in contact with the good. And here, the opposite holds again. If you have unfitting attitudes, that's bad, and will typically manifest your insensitivity, egotism or carelessness.

The Contact Account thus explains the value of a wide variety of intuitive welfare values. It explains why achievements, friendships, knowledge, pleasure and virtue seem to contribute to your welfare, while enmities, pain and vice seem to detract from it. It is, as far as we see, extensionally adequate: for anything that is intuitively good or bad for you, the Contact Account, together with plausible assumptions, entails its being so. Moreover, the account's explanations seem to be plausible. So the Contact Account does very well on the first and most important criterion for an adequate theory of welfare.

We think this makes the account preferable to hedonism and desire satisfactionism. According to hedonism, pleasure is the one basic welfare good and pain the one basic bad. According to desire satisfactionism, the satisfaction of your desires is the one basic welfare good, and their frustration the one basic bad. There are many variations and defenses of these views, and we can't substantiate our verdicts on them in any depth here.¹⁸ But we think both fail to adequately account for our intuitions. Our reasons are entirely familiar. We think intuitively it's other

¹⁷ For such an account of virtue, see Hurka (2001); for a classical source, see e.g. Augustine's *City of God* (esp. XV.22).

¹⁸ For overviews of hedonism and desire satisfactionism, see Gregory (2015) and Heathwood (2015) respectively.

things equal better not to live in an experience machine. Thus hedonism seems to undergenerate welfare goods: there are some intuitive goods it can't capture.¹⁹ Equally, we think intuitively the satisfaction of pointless desires, like counting blades of grass, doesn't improve your welfare at all. Thus desire satisfactionism seems to overgenerate welfare goods: it says some things are goods that intuitively are not.²⁰ If all of this is right, the Contact Account is in a crucial way preferable to hedonism and desire satisfactionism.

5. Explanatory Virtues

There's more to evaluating theories of welfare than extensional adequacy. Such theories should also give a good explanation for why things affect your welfare in the manner they do. They should realize *explanatory virtues*. What exactly constitutes an explanatory virtue is contentious. But plausibly, among other things, a theory's account of why things benefit or harm you should be unified, elegant and explanatorily powerful. In this section, we argue that the Contact Account does relatively well with respect to these virtues. To mount this argument, we'll contrast the account with standard objective list theories. These theories say there's a list of basic welfare goods and bads. To have a concrete example (built on the intuitions from section 4), consider the view on which achievements, friendships, knowledge, pleasure and virtue are the basic welfare goods, and enmity, pain and vice the basic bads. Let's call this view OL.²¹ OL may well be extensionally adequate: we won't argue that it isn't. But it suffers from at least three explanatory vices. Thus, we think the Contact Account is more explanatorily virtuous than standard objective list theories.

First, OL has a problem of disunity. This problem arises in two places. On the one hand, OL says there are exactly five fundamental things that can make your life better, and three that can make it worse. But what unites each list of things? OL has no answer to this question. Indeed, it claims that there is none. But other things equal, it seems preferable to have such an answer—to give a unified account of the things that can contribute to or detract from your welfare.²² The Contact Account provides such an account. It says that what unites the things that can contribute to your welfare is that they're the impersonal goods: they're the things that in themselves warrant a positive response. Similarly, what unites the things that can detract from your welfare is that they're the impersonal bads: they're the things that in themselves warrant a negative response. Thus, the account doesn't offer mere *lists*

¹⁹ This argument is of course from Nozick (1974, 42). For responses to it, see Crisp (2006a) or Bramble (2016a; 2016b).

²⁰ For responses to the problem of such desires, see Heathwood (2005) or Bruckner (2016).

²¹ For examples of objective list theories, see Finnis (1980, chs. 3–4), Parfit (1984, Appendix I), Fletcher (2013) and Hooker (2015). None of these exactly coincide with OL, but we think they face the same issues.

²² Sumner (1996, 46) and Bradley (2009, 16) make a similar complaint.

of the goods and bads that can impact your welfare. It gives a unified account of them.

On the other hand, OL provides no unified account of your relationship to the goods and bads. OL says, for example, that knowledge, friendship and achievement are good for you. But of course some instances of these things don't benefit you at all: Stephen Hawking's knowledge isn't good for you, and nor are Jane Austen's achievements or Pope Francis's friendships. Rather, it's only your knowledge, your achievements, your relationships which benefit you. But on the face of it, what makes something your knowledge differs from what makes something your achievement or friendship. Something is your knowledge, perhaps, when it's in part constituted by things going on in your head. Something is your achievement, perhaps, when it's in part constituted by your actions. A unified account of these relationships seems elusive. So it's not obvious that OL can give a unified story of how you must be connected to a good or bad in order for it to affect your welfare. The Contact Account provides such a unified story. It says a good or bad will affect your welfare if and only if you have a connection to it through a manifestation relation.

These two issues of disunity are related. One might think OL can answer at least the first worry. In particular, one might think it can simply adopt the Contact Account's story of what unites the goods and bads: it can say they're the things that in themselves warrant a positive or negative response. However, this reply to the first problem of disunity massively exacerbates the second. There's an enormous, indefinite number of things that warrant some such response: the fact that you produced a beautiful painting, recklessly caused five deaths or are unjustly imprisoned; the fact that the Last Supper is beautiful, that someone died in 5th century China or that Queen Victoria told a good joke in March 1882. Among these goods and bads, only those that are appropriately related to you affect your welfare. But OL gives no unified account of these relationships. And now it must not only give an account of the appropriate relationships to five different values: it must give an account of such relationships to an enormous, indefinite list of values. Unless OL provides such an account, it has to admit a disunified multiplicity of such relations. Now of course the advocate of the view could give a unified account of these relationships: they could understand them in terms of our notion of contact. But then, of course, their view has simply collapsed into the Contact Account.²³

Second, OL faces a problem of inelegance. The problem concerns the relation between OL's accounts of basic welfare goods and welfare bads. According to OL, there are five basic goods and three basic bads. Thus, not every basic good has a single, symmetrical, opposite bad. Nor is it obvious how to render OL symmetrical. For instance, what's the opposite of knowledge? You might have no

²³ One might worry that the Contact Account features a kind of disunity too. For all we've said, the impersonal values—the admirable, the sublime, the funny, and so on—might be unified in the thin sense that they all make certain responses appropriate. But they aren't unified in any deeper way—say, in all ultimately being reducible to the value of pleasure and pain. We agree that, other things equal, it's preferable to have a more deeply unified account of impersonal value too. And if there is one, the Contact Account can adopt it. But we doubt that any such account even remotely fits our intuitions.

belief at all about a proposition, or a false belief that's justified, or a false belief that's unjustified. All of these things are ways of not knowing. Yet it's not obvious which of them should count as a basic bad, or whether all of them should, and equally so. Similarly, what's the opposite of an achievement? You can fail in doing something that would be good, or have success in doing something pointless or bad, or you can simply not do anything at all. All of these things are opposed to achievement. But it's not obvious which of them is basically bad, or whether all of them are, and whether they are equally bad. So it's not clear how to make OL symmetrical in its account of welfare values.²⁴ To that extent, OL is inelegant. Again, the Contact Account does much better. It says the basic good is contact with the good and the basic bad contact with the bad. The latter is in a natural sense the opposite of the former. Thus the account is symmetrical and elegant.

Third, OL has a problem of explanatory weakness. The issue here is the comparison between different goods and bads, or the exact contribution of a particular instance of virtue, knowledge or pain to your welfare. Compare your suffering from intense back pain for a month with your giving a dollar to a beggar. OL says the former harms you while the latter does you good. And presumably, it should say the former harms you more than the latter benefits you: that the overall welfare effect of your back pain combined with your donation is negative. No doubt OL *can* say that: it can simply stipulate that intense pains are more harmful than small acts of virtue are beneficial. But OL doesn't have an explanation for why this is so. More generally, it doesn't have an explanation for why different welfare goods and bads compare in a particular way, or contribute to your welfare to the extent that they do. It posits unexplained facts about this. In this respect, OL is explanatorily shallow.

The Contact Account does have an explanation here. It says the contribution of a particular contact with value to your welfare is determined by the degree of the impersonal value and the degree of your contact with it. The degree of impersonal value is commensurable across values: it always corresponds to the intensity of the responses that it renders fitting. The degree of your contact with a value is also commensurable across values: it's always determined by the centrality of your connections with the value to your life and to it. So, the Contact Account has a general story about the exact contribution of particular goods and bads to your welfare. In this respect, it's explanatorily deep.

Now we have only considered OL as an example of an objective list theory. But these points seem to generalize to all standard theories of this kind. These theories face three problems: disunity, inelegance and explanatory weakness. The Contact Account evades each problem. To this extent, it's preferable to them.²⁵ To sum up, we think the overall dialectical situation is as follows. The most important

²⁴ For more on this, see Kagan (2015).

²⁵ Note that we're only talking about 'standard' objective list theories. We're not sure whether our points apply to *all* such theories. That's because we're not sure how best to define this class of views. (For the difficulties of doing so, see e.g. Fletcher 2016.) In particular, we're not sure whether, on the best definition, the Contact Account itself classifies as an objective list theory: one the one hand, the account does say your welfare is determined by objective goods; on the other hand, it doesn't offer a mere *list* of such goods. Nothing of philosophical importance hinges on this definitional question, so we leave it open here.

desideratum of a theory of welfare is that it fits with the intuitive data. On these grounds, the Contact Account seems superior to hedonism and desire satisfactionism. Yet a theory of welfare should also be explanatorily virtuous. And standard objective list theories have the just-mentioned explanatory vices. On these grounds, the Contact Account seems superior to them. So we think the Contact Account of welfare is worth taking very seriously indeed: it has clear advantages over all its main rivals.²⁶

6. Alienation and Hybridization

To end our paper, let's address a salient objection. This objection parallels a standard worry about objective list theories. Suppose you have almost everything on OL's list of goods: friendships, achievements, knowledge and so on. But you suffer from depression, so it all leaves you entirely cold: you don't feel a glimmer of excitement, appreciation or satisfaction about it. You're subjectively alienated from the objective goods in your life. Intuitively, your life isn't very good for you. But standard objective list theories seem unable to explain this. They seem to say your own attitude to the goods is irrelevant to your welfare: that all that matters is their objective value.²⁷ A similar worry arises about the Contact Account. You might be in close contact with the good, but totally apathetic about it: left cold by your involvement with beauty, achievement or virtue. Intuitively, one might think, this means your life isn't good for you. But the Contact Account, seemingly, can't capture this. It seems to say you can enjoy a good life while being alienated from everything that grounds its value.

We think the account can be defended against this objection. To begin with, welfare is less subjectivist than the objection suggests: intuitively, even if you don't subjectively value it at all, an objective value can benefit you. Suppose Leonardo thoroughly lacked any appreciation for the Last Supper: he thought he'd messed up composition, colors and expression completely. Still, that he produced one of the world's most sublime paintings seems to benefit him quite substantially. Even if he didn't see it, the value of the painting would have made it fitting for him to be very pleased for his own sake. It makes it fitting for us to be very pleased for him, or to desire quite strongly to be in his shoes. So in principle, values can benefit you even if you're alienated from them.²⁸

²⁶ There's a fourth prominent rival: perfectionism—the view that the welfare of a member of species *S* consists in the development and exercise of the capacities essential to *S* (see e.g. Hurka 1993; Kraut 2007; also Nussbaum 2011). Perfectionism also faces serious problems. For instance, it seems unable to explain why the life of a perfect human is better than that of a perfect bumblebee: both perfectly develop the capacities essential to their kind. And it seems unable to present an account of our nature that both has plausible welfare-implications and genuine explanatory power (see Dorsey 2010, 65–68). For what it's worth, we think the Contact Account is therefore superior to perfectionism as well.

²⁷ For this sort of point, see Railton (1986, 9) or Kagan (2009, 254). For further discussion, see Fletcher (2016, 156–58).

²⁸ For this thought, see Hooker (2015, 31–33), Sarch (2012, 444–45) or Woodard (2015, 165–67).

Now perhaps a proponent of the alienation challenge could accept this. They could admit that your subjective valuing isn't a *necessary* condition for you to get any benefit from an objective value at all. But they could insist that your valuing *amplifies* any benefit you get from it. On this view, an objective good in your life can improve your welfare, even if you're alienated from it. But your alienation is still very harmful, as it means you forego a magnification of the relevant personal good. This, we think, is a more tenable position than the view on which alienation strictly precludes any benefit. But it still faces problems. In particular, the objector now has to specify precisely how much amplification your positive attitudes will effect. And they have to specify precisely how much benefit you can get without such attitudes. We suspect that any specifications of these variables will seem somewhat arbitrary, reducing the appeal of the position substantially.

Moreover, it's not clear that the present view is extensionally very different from the Contact Account. That's because the Contact Account itself is much less objectivist than the objection assumes: even on this account, it matters greatly whether you subjectively value your objective values. The reason for this is that a key way to be in contact with a good is to actually value it. This is especially clear for the passive aspect of contact. Suppose you gaze at the Last Supper, but find it ugly. Your experience of it as ugly doesn't manifest its beauty at all: beauty is disposed to manifest in aesthetic appreciation rather than disapprobation. So your staring at the painting won't put you in touch with its goodness. Something similar is true for the active aspect of contact. Suppose you give a sandwich to someone who's hungry. But you don't value their getting that sandwich: it was a sheer coincidence, a total caprice, that you handed it to them. Then their having the sandwich doesn't manifest your compassion or humanity. It might not manifest any of your more central dispositions. So you might not get in much contact with it. More generally, mere passive confrontation with a value or active causal contribution to it isn't enough for you to have a *manifestation* relation to it. Thus even the Contact Account can explain why alienation will generally harm you.²⁹

So we think the Contact Account is perfectly tenable in the face of the alienation challenge. But there's also a more concessive response to this objection, which we wish to note. As indicated above, for standard objective list theories, the concessive response is to hybridize the theory. A hybridized version of an objective list theory says the things on the list are good for you (or amplifiedly good for you) only if you have some positive attitude to them.³⁰ A parallel response is open to the Contact Account. A hybridized version of this account says that contact with the good is good for you (or amplifiedly good for you) only when you have some positive attitude to it. So you need to value your production of beauty or your involvements with the value of your friends: if you don't, on this hybrid theory, they don't give you any (or only an unamplified) benefit. This gives us a contact account of welfare that is more strictly incompatible with your being alienated from the things that make your life good. Given the points in the previous paragraphs, and

²⁹ Objective list theorists sometimes make a similar point: that many goods involve some attitude towards having the good itself. See Fletcher (2013).

³⁰ For an overview of these views, see Woodard (2015). For further discussion, see Kagan (2009), Sarch (2012) or Hurka (2019).

given its greater simplicity, we prefer the original Contact Account to this hybridized version. But we think the latter is a decent theory of welfare as well. So, this is an interesting choice point for contact accounts of welfare.

7. Conclusion

We've presented an account of what's good for you: the good life, we claimed, is the life in touch with the good. We've argued that, in contrast to its main competitors, this theory is both extensionally adequate and explanatorily virtuous. And we've shown how it can be defended against a salient worry. We wish to end on a practical note. If the Contact Account is right, how ought you to live, insofar as your welfare is concerned? Generally speaking, you should live a life immersed in goodness and isolated from badness. That is, you should actively bring about valuable things: you should help other people, foster relationships, produce achievements. Equally, you should passively enjoy the good things that there are: you should celebrate your friendships, appreciate the beauty around you, savor the sun's rays when they reach you. At the same time, even just with regards to your welfare, you should avoid doing anything bad: you should not engage in moral wrongdoing, contribute to failure, or produce ugly things. When you face bad things, you shouldn't exactly ignore them: ignoring them would be unfitting, and this unfittingness would harm you. But you should, let us say, be a little Stoic in the face of the bad: you should let the ugliness, the misery and viciousness in this world get you down as little as you fittingly can. This, we think, is a highly compelling portrait of a life lived well.

Let's stress a final point. The Contact Account itself doesn't say which things are impersonally valuable. We've made a number of such claims here: that achievements and beauty are good, that vices are bad, and so on. We think that all of these claims are plausible, given our understanding of impersonal value. But we haven't offered anything like a theory of what's impersonally valuable. To that extent, we haven't offered a fully concrete or complete theory of welfare either. And to be honest, that's not just due to 'the limits of this paper': we don't have a general theory of value. Thus we don't have a fully concrete or complete theory of welfare. One might find this disappointing. We ourselves are at times slightly disheartened by it. But we think one can't blame the Contact Account for it. On the contrary, human life is staggeringly rich. There are infinitely many ways to live well. It would be surprising if some simple theory answered all questions about welfare, all the way down. So there's more to be done in determining what the good life is. Ultimately, we must determine what's beautiful, just, virtuous, funny or sublime. We must, in other words, answer many of the great questions of moral philosophy.

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