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TOUCHING THE GOOD

SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS AS CONTACT WITH VALUE

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IMAGINE that your dear neighbor Rachel has had a car accident. It was a foggy night. The rain had formed a thin sheen on the road. She took a sharp corner too fast, and her car spun out of control. She was seriously injured and will be bedridden 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, and so on. You know there are thousands of people in Lynn's situation: single parents, overwhelmed caregivers, struggling businesspeople. Yet Lynn is your neighbor. You have known her for almost your entire life. You have a special relationship with her. So you care much more about Lynn's plight than about the struggles of strangers. You are more moved emotionally by her predicament and will likely 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 wants to build a bypass. They need to knock down your house. The bulldozers threaten many homes that are as valuable as yours. But you have a stronger emotional reaction to its possible destruction than to the destruction of other houses, and you will likely do more to actively protect it. Similarly, imagine you are a mathematician. You have worked for three years on an intricate proof. You think you have finally got it and are about to send it off for publication. But then you discover your mistake: the third lemma on the seventh page is false. Much of your work was in vain. Again, you are not alone in this fate. Many intellectual projects fail. Your failure is not objectively more regrettable than these others. But you are likely to regret it much more and to 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 with which we have special relationships. This caring has both affective and practical dimensions: we have greater emotional reactions and take more actions 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 are not making a mistake by caring more about our neighbors, our own homes, and our own proofs. Quite the opposite: intuitively, we would make a mistake by ignoring our special relationships. We would 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 are individuals, with our own points of view. As we 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 is 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 and makes it significant to you. We call this the *contact account of significance* (which will be laid out in section 2). We argue that this account captures both core cases of personal relationships (section 3) and more challenging cases (section 4). Indeed, we suggest that it can also explain our reasons of gratitude and compensation (section 5), as well as how we discount for temporal and modal distance (section 6). Many of our reasons, in short, can be seen as emerging from such contact. So the contact account seems worth taking seriously indeed. But before we turn to this, let us say more about the core phenomenon that we aim to explain.

1. THE QUESTION

We start with some stage setting. Intuitively, you care about many kinds of thing: people, places, nations, truths, and so on. But for convenience, we assume that you fundamentally care about facts.[1] More precisely, we assume

1 For expository purposes, it is simplest to assume that our attitudes of caring have just one kind of object. We opt for facts primarily because they are very flexible. It is, for instance, easy to translate care about facts into care about things, and vice versa. One simply says you care about a thing if and only if you care about a fact concerning that thing. Yet we think there is also a more positive reason to focus on facts. There are very many ways in which you could care about, say, Lynn as a bare object. You could want her life to go well for her or could want her to buy your products or to suffer some misfortune. In saying you care about her, we typically have in mind only some of these forms of caring. A straightforward way of putting this is to say you care about certain facts about Lynn but not others—e.g., the fact that her well-being is morally valuable but not the fact that she could increase your wealth or satisfy sadist desires. So to assume we care about facts is often the best way of accurately describing our attitudes. Still, nothing much hinges on the assumption that we care about facts. One can easily reformulate the contact account under the assumption that we fundamentally care about a broader range of entities.

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 is a value fact. We say that you *care* about a value fact if you do respond to it with the affective and practical responses 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 that the canyon is dangerous if you are appropriately respectful about entering it and plan accordingly before you do.[2]

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 do not 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 are utterly overcome with despair: you are 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 is also a function of your relationship to the fact. In particular, intuitively, your special relationship to a value fact can intensify the weight of your reasons to care about it.[3] This gives rise to our phenomenon. We say that a value fact is *personally significant* to you when you have a special relationship

2 Our notion of caring is similar to Scheffler's notion of valuing. See Scheffler, "Valuing." The main difference is that to value something in Scheffler's sense, you must believe it is "good or worthy" (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, "Valuing and Caring"; and Kubala, "Valuing and Believing Valuable."

3 The idea that personal relationships are intensifiers is emphasized by, e.g., Lord, "Justifying Partiality"; and Löschke, "Relationships as Indirect Intensifiers." It is also suggested in, e.g., Jollimore, *Love's Vision*, 114; Keller, *Partiality*, 136; and Lazar, "The Justification of Associative Duties," 51.

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 these facts 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 away; 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 third-century Rome. In each case, intuitively, you have a special relationship with the first fact. And that is why you ought to care about it especially. It is why, in our parlance, it is personally significant to you. Our question is: What makes a fact personally significant to you in this sense?

To be clear, the target of our inquiry does not cover all cases in which you have some reason to care about one thing more than another equally valuable thing. Imagine a billionaire says that they will give you a million dollars if you care especially about their favorite book. This arguably gives you some reason to care about that book more than other equally good books. We do not aim to capture this phenomenon. In such a case, your reason to care especially about the book is not explained by any substantive special relationship you have with it. You do not (yet) have any such relationship with the book. Your reason to care about it is grounded in the billionaire's offer alone. We are interested in cases in which your reason to care about something especially is grounded in such a special relationship. Here we get a grip on the pretheoretical notion of a special relationship by seeing it at work in our paradigmatic examples—your relationship to your neighbor, your childhood home, your own proof. The target of our inquiry is that sometimes such relationships make it appropriate to care especially about something. When we aim to explain *personal significance*, we aim to explain just this phenomenon.

Let us stress something. As we have glossed the matter, it is not just people that can be significant to you: objects and projects and indeed any kind of value fact can be significant to you. Personal significance is a very general phenomenon. That is 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 is typically *morally* inappropriate not to care about them. You do something morally wrong if you are 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 is preferable to have an account of personal significance that respects the relevant differences here, at the same time as being general and unified.[4]

Many accounts of significance have been proposed. Yet we find none of them convincing. Our reasons are for the most part familiar. But it is worth rehearsing them briefly. Let us start with subjectivism. According to subjectivism, what makes something personally significant for you is your subjective desires, commitments, or concerns for that thing. You have special reasons with regard to your proof, say, just because you care about it. Bernard Williams is sometimes interpreted as defending such an account, in the form of a "project view."[5] We think such subjectivism is too subjectivist. It implies that if you just do not care about your neighbor, house, or proof, you do not have any special reasons regarding them. And if out of a psychological idiosyncrasy, you care especially about people with the same number of hairs or the same skin color as you, you have special reasons vis-à-vis these people. But this, we think, is wrong. If you have known your neighbor for decades, you would just be wrong to treat her like a complete stranger. And your peculiar psychological attitudes do not give you reasons to care especially about the people who share your hair number or skin color. Personal significance is at least partly an objective matter.[6]

A natural way to introduce objectivity is through the value of the relevant relation. That is what relationship views do. On these views, what makes something personally significant for you is the fact that you have a noninstrumentally valuable relationship to it. So you have special reasons with respect to your childhood house, say, because your relationship to it is noninstrumentally

4 For a defense of the importance of unity in the context of moral theories, see Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics,* 249–52. For a more general discussion of it, see Keas, "Systematizing the Theoretical Virtues," 2775–80.

5 See Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality." For this take on Williams, see Keller, *Partiality*, 31–35. Williams's broader project is to give an account of reasons in general: to say that *all* our reasons are somehow grounded in subjective states (see esp. "Internal and External Reasons"). One need not be such a general subjectivist to endorse subjectivism about significance. One might think there are objective values but that our subjective attitudes give us reasons to care especially about some of them rather than others. Still, general subjectivism is compatible with how we characterize the phenomenon of personal significance. For instance, even as a general subjectivist, Williams can (and, we think, does) give a specific account of the *particular* reasons that arise from special relationships in our sense. We focus on just this specific aspect of his overall view. For some similar other versions of this account of personal significance, see Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*; Stroud, "Permissible Partiality, Projects, and Plural Agency"; and Drake, "Love, Reasons, and Desire."

6 A similar worry about subjectivism is articulated in, e.g., Scheffler, "Projects, Relationships, and Reasons"; and Keller, *Partiality*, ch. 2. For more arguments, see, e.g., Jeske, "Friendship, Virtue, and Impartiality" and *Rationality and Moral Theory*.

good. Such a view is defended, for example, by Samuel Scheffler.[7] Relationship views are adequately objectivist. Your relation to your neighbor (or the people sharing your hair number or skin color) may have (or lack) value and thus give (or not give) you special reasons—whether you want it or not. Yet relationship views face a familiar and, we think, serious focus problem. They locate the relevant value in the *relationship* you have to something. But intuitively, it is in the *thing itself*. If you treat Lynn like a complete stranger, the core problem is not that you fail to value the relationship you have to her (your neighborhood or your friendship); it is that you fail to value *her*.[8]

This has led many people to defend individualist views. According to these views, what makes something personally significant for you are the individual properties or value of the thing itself. For instance, ultimately, Lynn is personally significant to you because she is so benevolent and kind. This kind of view is defended most prominently by Simon Keller.[9] It avoids the focus problem as it locates the relevant value in the object of significance itself. However, it faces a challenge. It needs to explain *which* things we ought to care about especially and *why* we ought to do so—given that many other things are objectively just as valuable. There are many people as benevolent and kind as Lynn. So why is it appropriate for you to care especially about her? Or why would it not be appropriate to care especially about an otherwise similar woman you have never met and know nothing about?[10]

A natural line to take at this juncture is to emphasize something like personal acquaintance. We may call this the acquaintance view. On this view, what makes something personally significant for you is that you are acquainted with its individual properties or value. Here acquaintance is the kind of relationship that you have to your childhood home, for example. You have experienced it, have a special understanding and knowledge of it. The proposal is that something is significant to you because of such acquaintance. Such an idea is

7 See Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities," *Boundaries and Allegiances*, "Morality and Reasonable Partiality," and "Membership and Political Obligation." Related views are suggested by, e.g., Raz, "Liberating Duties"; Seglow, *Defending Associative Duties*; and Lazar, "The Justification of Associative Duties."

8 See Keller, *Partiality*, 62–64. In our official language of value facts, the problem here is that what we care about when we care about someone is not a relational fact (i.e., how they are related to us) but facts singularly about them: their well-being, their mental states, their life.

9 See Keller, *Partiality*. Related ideas are defended by, e.g., Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion"; Lord, "Justifying Partiality"; and Naar, "Subject-Relative Reasons for Love."

10 Keller himself mentions this worry (*Partiality*, ch. 5). In response, he accepts a form of particularism (150–52). Many people have found this view unsatisfyingly nonexplanatory. See, e.g., Olson, "Review," 624–26.

suggested, for example, by Kieran Setiya.[11] *Prima facie*, it helps meet the challenge set out for the individualist view. We are, after all, acquainted with only certain things. So perhaps acquaintance views can explain why we should care about some things more than others. But such views are also unsatisfactory. The problem is that, as we understand the relation of acquaintance, it is too passive. Acquaintance involves the world impinging on you rather than you impinging on the world. Yet sometimes how you impinge on the world matters to what you should care about. Consider your mathematical proof. In principle, you might be just as acquainted with a colleague's attempt to prove something as with your own. Your colleague might keep you exhaustively updated on their progress: on their blind alleys, their small successes, their ultimate failure. You might even understand more about their proof than about yours: you might have a keener awareness of why their strategy did not work or of what this means for their overall research project, or you might have forgotten some details of your own work. Still, you have a connection to your own proof that you cannot have to your colleague's: you *produced* it. You do not merely understand it; you made it. This is (at least partly) why your own proof is typically more significant to you. Acquaintance does not capture this active dimension of personal significance.

One might think that the resonance view, as defended by Niko Kolodny, captures this active dimension.[12] Kolodny thinks that our attitudes should be, in a special way, coherent. For instance, suppose the discrete encounters you have had with Lynn called for sympathy. Then your overall attitude to her should also be a kind of sympathy—but a sympathy that is open ended, involves a kind of commitment for the future, and thus reflects the fact that you have had a prolonged history with her.[13] Or again, suppose that you and Lynn were both active in opposing the plans to build a power plant in the region. Then you may have reason to step in for her while she is occupied with Rachel's accident—and not just instrumentally to secure your project but also out of solidarity with her, as a reflection of the fact that you were both in this project together.[14] Kolodny sees these cases as instances of a more general phenomenon, which he calls *resonance*:

11 See Setiya, "Other People." Similar thoughts are explored in, e.g., Jollimore, *Love's Vision*; Lewis, "The Aesthetics of Coming to Know Someone"; and Kirwin, "Value Realism and Idiosyncrasy."

12 See Kolodny, "Which Relationships Justify Partiality? The Case of Parents and Children" and "Which Relationships Justify Partiality? General Considerations and Problem Cases."

13 Kolodny, "Which Relationships Justify Partiality? The Case of Parents and Children," 51.

14 Kolodny, "Which Relationships Justify Partiality? The Case of Parents and Children," 52.

> *Resonance*: One has reason to respond to *X* in a way that is similar to the way that one has reason to respond to its counterpart in another dimension of importance, but that reflects the distinctive importance of the dimension to which *X* belongs.[15]

In our examples, you have reason to respond to Lynn's situation in a way that is similar to how you would respond to a stranger suffering or missing in the policy rally—but that reflects the fact that you have had a history of positive encounters ("resonance of histories of encounter") and shared activism ("resonance of common personal situations") with Lynn. Perhaps this can capture both the passive and the active dimensions of significance: resonance plays out in many ways. But this, we think, also indicates a bug: the resonance view is not really that unified. Kolodny understands resonance not as an underlying law that grounds the personal significance of various facts. Rather, it is "merely a description of an abstract structure shared by principles" that do the actual explanatory work—like resonance of histories of encounter or common personal situations.[16] According to Kolodny, when we explain why you ought to be partial towards your neighbors, your children, or your parents, we still need to invoke a host of substantively different actual principles—appealing sometimes to the normative import of responsibility, to that of having an aim, and so on. Resonance provides a unified *form* of explanation, but it does not point us to any single explanans. In this sense, we might say the unity provided by resonance is shallow. Other things equal, a deeper unity would be preferable.

So these are our reasons for proposing a novel view. In sum, we think no existing account of personal significance is fully satisfactory. We want an account that respects our intuitive judgements while being partly objectivist. Yet we also want an account that says that in special relationships we respond to the value of that to which we are related. And we want an account that unifies the different cases of personal significance while respecting both active and passive kinds of significance. Our aim in this paper is to offer such an account. We think the idea of manifestation is crucial for that. So let us turn to this now.

2. THE ANSWER

We start from a simple intuition. The unifying phenomenon at play in our examples is that you are in a kind of *contact* with the value of these things—the value of your former home or of your mathematical proof. More precisely, you stand in passive contact with the value of that house: you have been affected

15 Kolodny, "Which Relationships Justify Partiality? The Case of Parents and Children," 47.

16 Kolodny, "Which Relationships Justify Partiality? The Case of Parents and Children," 47.

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 other intellectual endeavors. And that is why you ought to care especially about your home and your proof. More generally, there is a vast universe of value facts out there, but you are in close active or passive contact with just a fraction of them. And a value fact is significant to you only insofar as you are in such contact with it.

How ought we to understand this contact? One simple idea is that contact is a causal notion: you are in contact with a value fact p to the extent that p has a causal impact on you or that 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 were not for her, they would never have been painted at all. But the fact that these paintings are beautiful does not seem significant to her: she does not seem to have special reasons to appreciate them aesthetically. They were an all too fortuitous consequence of her actions. More generally, mere causal connections often seem too contingent or incidental. A more internal or nonaccidental connection to something's value underpins personal significance.

We propose therefore that contact should be understood in terms of *manifestation*.[17] Manifestation is a nonaccidental causal connection. At its core, it can be understood in terms of dispositions. Consider the fragility of a vase. This is the disposition to shatter when dropped. We say that its being dropped is the *stimulus condition* of the disposition, and its shattering is its *manifestation condition*. If D is a disposition with stimulus condition S and manifestation condition M, we say that M *actualizes* D when M occurs because D and S obtain. In this sense, the vase's shattering actualizes its fragility when it shatters because it is fragile, and it is dropped.[18] At a rough approximation, manifestation is just actualization of dispositions. 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 is not the disposition to cause financial troubles. It is the disposition to shatter. So only the shattering

17 We have employed the notion of manifestation already in Lovett and Riedener, "Commonsense Morality and Contact with Value" and "The Good Life as the Life in Touch with the Good." In the following exposition, we draw on this work.

18 For an overview on the metaphysics of dispositions, see Choi and Fara, "Dispositions."

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. Leon Trotsky's death manifested this. Manifestation, in all these cases, is less accidental than brute causal connections. Thus, at a rough approximation, we say you are in contact with a value when your dispositions are actualized in it, or its dispositions are actualized in you.

But that is only a rough approximation. The problem with it is that, in this sense of 'manifestation', only dispositions are manifest. But plausibly, manifestation is a little more than mere actualization of dispositions. To see this, consider looking at a beautiful painting. One might think the beauty of the painting is not itself the disposition to cause aesthetic experiences in people who look at it. The beauty and this disposition are not identical. Still, those aesthetic experiences do, in a perfectly natural sense, manifest the painting's beauty. Similarly, imagine you write a book of beautiful poems, yet your work is unjustly reviled by the critics. 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. Yet again, in a perfectly natural sense, the fact that this criticism is unjust is a manifestation of your lyrical prowess.

To capture this, we use the notion of ground. Think about the connection between crimson and red, between the members of a set and the set as a whole, or between the parts of a table and the table. These all exemplify a distinctive kind of noncausal explanation—grounding.[19] Similarly, the connection between a painting's beauty and its disposition to cause aesthetic experiences is a grounding relation. The fact that your poems are good grounds the fact that criticism of them is unjust. Roughly, we want to say that manifestation is indifferent to such grounding connections. More precisely, let us say that p is *ground-theoretically connected* to q if and only if p grounds q or q grounds p.[20] We say that q *manifests* p if and only if q or something ground-theoretically connected to q actualizes p or something ground-theoretically connected to p.[21] This definition picks out a class of nonaccidental connections. It precisely

19 For more on grounding in general, see Rosen, "Metaphysical Dependence"; and Fine, "Guide to Ground." One might worry that these cases are too disunified to pick out any one relationship. But we think they all pick out a kind of noncausal explanation, and one can say general things about the formal features of this form of explanation (e.g., its transitivity and asymmetry) and even how it connects to modality. That is unity enough for the work we want grounding to do in this paper.

20 The relevant notion of ground is strict partial ground. See, e.g., Fine, "Guide to Ground."

21 These definitions are originally from Lovett and Riedener, "Commonsense Morality and Contact with Value," 414.

articulates our conception of the kind of contact with value relevant to personal significance. A little diagram (figure 1) helps to illustrate this notion.[22]

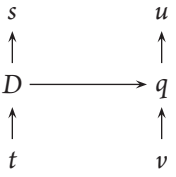

FIGURE 1

The left-to-right arrow stands for the actualization relation while the upward arrows stand for the grounding relation. So in this diagram, q actualizes disposition D, while t grounds D, D grounds s, v grounds q, and q grounds u. Let us see how this applies to our cases. 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 the beauty of these poems (q) actualizes 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. Similarly, imagine that you look at a beautiful painting and have an aesthetic experience. Say that the painting has a disposition (D) to cause aesthetic experiences when people look at it. Your aesthetic experience (q) actualizes this disposition. Suppose that this disposition is grounded in the painting's beauty (t). Then, we say, your experience manifests the beauty.

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 a manifestation relation of this form. More precisely, we propose the

> *Contact Account of Significance*: A value fact p is significant to you to the extent that (1) p is manifest in your current life or (2) your current life is manifest in p.

The first clause here picks out the passive aspect of contact. In this way, when you are 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 write a beautiful poem, that puts you in contact with its beauty: your aesthetic sensitivity is manifest in it. It is such

22 We use the same diagram in Lovett and Riedener, "Commonsense Morality and Contact with Value," 414.

contact that gives you reason to care especially about this beauty. The contact intensifies the strength of your reasons to care about the beauty. The more closely you are in contact with a value fact, the more you should care about it. This is the heart of our view.

Let us make two more clarifications. First, what do we mean by 'your life'? We are 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 have ever had. So if you are disposed to be exhausted for days after running a marathon, that is part of your life as well. This is not 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 is only your *current* life that matters to significance: you should care about something insofar as it is 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 have not retained, say, fond memories of clam chowder or bad baseball. Then you should not care especially about Massachusetts. It is 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 (perhaps among other things) 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 is grounded in, say, 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.[23] You are 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.

23 The idea that grounding comes in degrees has not yet been explored in the literature. But it seems very intuitive. Also, it is quotidian to analogize grounding to causation (see, e.g., Fine, "Guide to Ground"), and causation clearly comes in degrees. So we see this lack of exploration as a shortcoming in the literature rather than in the idea.

So that is the contact account. One might at this point wonder *why* contact with value makes a thing personally significant to you. Why should it have such normative import? The force of this question is defused by seeing the wider import of contact with value. In other work, we have tried to make that wider import clear. In our paper "Commonsense Morality and Contact with Value," we argued that contact with value can explain many features of commonsense morality. It can explain, for example, our obligations to keep our promises and not to harm others. In "The Good Life as the Life in Touch with the Good," we independently argued that contact with value can furnish us with a theory of personal well-being. The idea is that the good life is the life in contact with the good. The contact account of significance corresponds to the reactive contact principle advanced in "Commonsense Morality and Contact with Value" and uses the same core ideology as all of this work. If these other claims are true, contact with value has a broad application across moral philosophy. One need not of course accept these other views to accept the contact account of significance. But contact with value constitutes a unified and general explanation of various ethical domains. And this makes it much less surprising that it would help us explain the phenomenon of personal significance specifically.

There is still a general question about whether contact principles have any deeper explanation. We need not commit to an answer to that question here. But our own view is that normative inquiry has to stop somewhere. A set of very broadly explanatory principles is a good stopping point. So we are inclined to take the contact account to state a fundamental fact, a place in the normative universe where the spade is turned. We are not opposed to a more fundamental explanation of the account, but we personally do not know of any—and think that none is necessary.

Still, we have not yet provided any evidence for the contact account. We turn to that now. Our argument for the contact account is abductive: it rests on how well the account explains cases. So let us now see how the account illuminates our initial examples.

3. PEOPLE, OBJECTS, AND PROJECTS

Consider the case of your neighbor Lynn. It is bad for her that she is overwhelmed by the situation. Part of what grounds this badness, say, is that she is such a compassionate, selfless, and caring person. She has a strong desire that the people around her fare well. If she did not have this desire—if she were more insouciant about Rachel's bedriddenness or about the sorrows and woes of their children—her situation would not be as bad for her. Lynn's concern for others can be understood in terms of dispositions: she is strongly disposed

to empathize with other people and help them when she sees they are in need. And these dispositions are manifest in your current life. Your business is afloat today because of the money she lent you. You have 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 is so generous, warm, and considerate. So the fact that Lynn's troubles are bad for her is manifest in your current life. Hence, it is 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 hers 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 are in need, to ask others for support in this, get emotional about their welfare when it is brought up in conversation, etc. These more specific dispositions too partly ground the badness of her situation. And perhaps they are also manifest in your life. Perhaps you are 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 do so. Or you have a vivid image of her as a concerned mother because she has often been 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 Lynn's family are 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 and the more of her life she has shared with you, the more you are 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.[24] Something similar is true of good friendships. Friends' valuable properties are manifest in valuable parts of their lives. Your

24 For some related points, see Brighouse and Swift, "Legitimate Parental Partiality," 53–54.

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 with someone, you are especially in touch with their value, and they are especially in touch with yours. That is why you should care more about your nearest and dearest than about people more distant from you.

Now let us 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 are so fond—are 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 are 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 are 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 are 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 different kinds of value. People have moral value: their lives have moral import, their autonomy has moral weight, and 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 nonmoral reasons. Thus, contact with the value of people generally intensifies your moral reasons while that with the value of objects and projects is more likely to intensify your prudential or aesthetic reasons.

So the contact account seems to explain our initial cases well. In fact, it seems to meet all the criteria we have sketched in section 1. Note that whether or not you are in a manifestation relation with something is not entirely subjective. You can be in (or lack) contact with something whether you want it or not. Also, the relevant value that is doing the normative work is that of the thing itself, not that of your relationship to it. These things are significant for you because you are in contact with *their value*, not somehow because it is valuable for you to have such contact. Still, the account is thoroughly unified. Be it active or passive or relating to people, objects, or projects, the relevant relation is always the same. These are sufficient reasons alone to think the contact account is a very good account of significance: that contact with a value intensifies the weight of the reasons this value grounds. But the main argument for the account lies in its broader explanatory power.

4. 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 start with a case of chosen attachment. Above, we have claimed that personal significance is not entirely subjective. *Inter alia*, that means you cannot always just choose which things are significant to you. Still, sometimes your choices matter. 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 this team than about its rivals. This phenomenon is common: often we choose what to care about, and the ensuing care is perfectly appropriate. The contact account straightforwardly explains 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 typically manifests that good. The contact account can then explain quite generally how we are able to choose our attachments. The crucial point is simply that contact with value need not *always* be objective: it can consist in your own attitudes towards that value.

Let us consider a second case. Suppose you have just had a daughter. You should care immensely about her. Indeed, you should care more about her 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 child. Your daughter has been alive for only a few hours: she has not, 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 her vulnerability, that puts you in contact with her innocence and vulnerability. Valuing your child puts you in contact with its 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 her through pregnancy. This puts you in contact with the valuable features of your newborn, and that is why you should care about her 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 us turn to a third phenomenon. We have 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.[25] 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 or not to want it to go well. You have reason to want your enemy's life to go badly or to temper your desire that it go well because you are in contact with their vices. More generally, negative partiality arises when you are in contact with someone's bad features. These features warrant negative rather than positive responses.

Consider a fourth case. The contact account, we have argued, can explain both positive and negative partiality. But some relations give rise to no duties of partiality at all. Think about hair number or skin color. The fact that you have the same number of hairs as a stranger does not give you any reason to care

25 For illuminating recent discussions of negative partiality, see Brandt, "Negative Partiality"; and Lange and Brandt, "Partiality, Asymmetries, and Morality's Harmonious Propensity."

about them especially. The fact that you have the same skin color as someone else gives you no reason to be partial to them. The contact account explains this straightforwardly. Sharing the number of hairs with someone is not a way to be in contact with their good qualities. It does not make their value manifest in your life or vice versa. And so according to the contact account, shared hair number does not underpin duties of partiality. This point generalizes to all cases in which sharing a feature with someone does not mean you should care about them especially.

We will end with a fifth case. Imagine you spend five minutes speaking to someone about their life. You have a closer relationship to them than you do to a perfect stranger. Yet such a passing acquaintance does not seem enough to justify partiality in very important decisions. If you can later save either the life of your passing acquaintance or that of the perfect stranger, your closer relationship with the former does not mean you ought to favor them. The contact account can explain this. The explanation invokes incommensurability. Lives are typically incommensurable with respect to value. That means our reason to save one stranger is typically not weightier than, not less weighty than, nor exactly equally as weighty as our reason to save another stranger. These reasons are incommensurable in weight. A small addition in weight to the reasons to save one stranger's life usually does not disturb such incommensurability.[26] But a passing acquaintance with someone establishes only a very mild form of contact, and so it only very mildly intensifies the reason you have to save their life. Thus, these reasons remain no more weighty than your reason to save a perfect stranger's life. Passing acquaintance is not generally enough to make a difference to life-and-death decisions.[27]

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

5. GRATITUDE AND COMPENSATION

We have 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

26 For a classic discussion of this point about "small improvements," see Chang, "Introduction."

27 Perhaps there is something else at work in such decisions too. You might have some positive reasons of fairness to exclude considerations of partiality from your deliberations. Perhaps it is unfair to let your relationship with someone affect whether you save their life. You have reasons of fairness to be impartial. If so, this would also help explain why you should not let your passing acquaintance with someone affect whether you save their life. We will let readers decide whether they prefer this explanation or the one in the text.

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 lets us expand the circle of partiality, so to speak: 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 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 are doing badly, say, and extra motivated to help them out when you can. Here is how the contact account can explain this. Your benefactor's life is valuable: it is good if they are doing well and bad if they are doing badly. This value fact generally gives rise to reasons: it is appropriate for us all to hope that your benefactor does well and to help them out if we can. Now, part of why your benefactor's life is valuable in this way is that they are virtuous: it is 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 are 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 is how the contact account can explain this. That your victim is unjustly lacking her car is a value fact: it makes it appropriate for us all to feel sorry for them and to 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 to 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 often do not merely have reason to help such

people: you have a *duty* to do so. 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. Often, it is not just that we have special reasons to care for our friends or children: we have obligations to care for them. How do we get obligations out of such reasons? This question clearly is not one that only the contact account faces. It can be asked of anybody who takes a reasons-first approach to ethics.[28] Fortunately, the contact account seems compatible with any plausible answer to this question. One plausible answer, for example, derives obligations from the relative strength of reasons. It says that an action is morally obligatory if and only if the moral reasons that support it are stronger than all of the reasons—moral and nonmoral—that support any alternative.[29] On this view, contact with value gives you duties or obligations when it intensifies the strength of your moral reasons to do something to such an extent that they are stronger than your reasons to do otherwise.[30]

6. DISCOUNTING

Let us further strengthen the case for the contact account by applying it to some cases of nonmoral normativity—that is, 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 are 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 just as familiar: generally, we care less about things the more distant they are in the past. When a relative dies, when you are deeply wronged, or when one of your hopes is thwarted, you first feel intense grief, anger, or disappointment, and you may be motivated to do a lot about it. But then the intensity of your emotions wanes, and you are likely no longer as inclined to act.[31] This, it seems, is as it should be. It is bizarre to care as much about a trip in fifty years as about one that starts

28 For an especially thorough exploration of this view, see Schroeder, *Reasons First*. For more on this debate, see Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, ch. 5; Snedegar, "Reasons, Oughts, and Requirements"; and Schmidt, "How Reasons Determine Moral Requirements" and "The Balancing View of Ought."

29 This view is defended in de Kenessey, "The Relation Between Moral Reasons and Moral Requirement."

30 For more on this point, see Lovett and Riedener, "Commonsense Morality and Contact with Value," 426.

31 For prior discussion of this, see Marušić, "Do Reasons Expire" and *On the Temporality of Emotions*; Callard, "The Reason to Be Angry Forever"; and Na'aman, "The Rationality of Emotional Change."

next week. It is pathological to care unabated about past losses, injustices, or disappointments without regard for the passage of time. The contact account vindicates these phenomena too. It can let us understand these phenomena too as kinds of partiality.

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 whether a fact is 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 will engage in. And these will manifest your current adventurousness, impetuousness, 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 will 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 will get other friends, have other conversations and different chess partners. You will think of the friend's death less and less and will 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 us turn to a different, less familiar phenomenon: *modal discounting*. We treat close and remote possibilities differently. Imagine you are driving home from work. It is a wet and foggy night. Suddenly, a car comes from the other direction. They have gone around a corner too fast and are spinning out of control. You slam 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 distant 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 were not 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 do not have lightning reflexes 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 are 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 of significance. Explanatorily speaking, it is enormously powerful. Any view that explains such a wide swathe of ethical phenomena is worth taking seriously indeed.

7. CONCLUSION

Let us conclude. We think the contact account of significance expresses a very intuitive idea. Contact with value matters. This idea is explanatorily powerful, and it was present in Western philosophy from its inception. 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.[32] In the *Symposium*, he suggested that we should follow the sweet call of Eros, and beget good things.[33] The best life, he suggested, was the life in some kind of contact with the good. The contact account is reminiscent of Plato's view. But it focuses on personal significance rather than the good life. It says that contact with value intensifies the weight of our reasons to care about that value. Despite the difference, we take heart from the parallel between Plato's view and the contact account of

32 Plato, *The Republic*, 514a–520a.

33 Plato, *The Symposium*, 206a–212a.

significance. We think that both get at a magnetic but elusive idea. Both get at the sublimity of touching the good.[34]

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