

Touching the Good: Special Relationships as Contact With Value

Abstract. It seems appropriate for you to care more about your friends than about strangers, more about your keepsakes and projects than the keepsakes and projects of others. Some things are personally significant to you. But when is something significant to you? In this paper, we advance the Contact Account of Significance. You are in contact with a value when it is manifest in your life or when your life is manifest in it. And it's this contact with a value that makes it significant to you. We argue that this captures standard cases of personal relationships to people, objects and projects. We then suggest that it explains various other normative phenomena too: our reasons of gratitude and compensation, as well as how we discount for temporal and modal distance. In light of its theoretical virtues and explanatory power, we conclude, the Contact Account is worth taking seriously indeed.

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1. Introduction

Imagine your dear neighbor Rachel has had a car accident. It was a foggy night. The rain had formed a thin sheen on the road. She took a sharp corner too fast, and her car spun out of control. She was seriously injured, and will be bed-ridden for weeks. So the household responsibilities have all fallen on her partner Lynn. Lynn must look after their children, do the housekeeping, manage their business. Now you know there are thousands of people in Lynn's situation: single parents, overwhelmed caregivers, struggling businesspeople. Yet Lynn is your neighbor. You've known her for almost your entire life. You have a special relationship with her. So you'll care much more about Lynn's plight than about the struggles of strangers. You'll be more moved emotionally by her predicament, and do more to actively help her.

We seem to have such special relationships to objects and projects as well as to people. Consider, for instance, your childhood home. You love the place. You remember it as warm, cozy, welcoming. But the local government wants to build a bypass. They need to knock down your house. Now the bulldozers threaten many homes as valuable as yours. But you'll have a stronger emotional reaction to its possible destruction than to the destruction of other houses, and you'll do more to actively protect it. Similarly, imagine you're a mathematician. You've worked for three years on an intricate proof. You think you've finally got it and are about to send it off to the journals. But then you discover your mistake. The third lemma on the seventh page is false. Much of your work was in vain. Again, you're not alone in this fate. Many intellectual projects fail. Your failure is not objectively more regrettable than these. But you will regret it much more, and spend more time trying to repair your invalid proof than the invalid proofs of your colleagues.

In short, we all care more about some things than about other equally valuable things: we care more about the people, objects and projects to whom we have a special relationship. This caring has both affective and practical dimensions: we have a greater emotional reaction and will take more action in response to these things than to other equally valuable things. Moreover, and crucially, it seems that this is all as it should be: we're not making a mistake by caring more about our neighbors, our own homes and proofs. Quite the opposite: we'd make a mistake by ignoring our special relationships. We'd go wrong by caring about everything as if from the point of view of the universe. None of us, after all, is the universe. We're individuals, with our own points of view. As we'll put it, some things are *personally significant* to us. In virtue of our special relationship with them, we should care about them especially.

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

2. The question

We'll start with some stage-setting. Intuitively, you care about many kinds of thing: people, places, nations, truths and so on. But, for convenience, we'll assume that you fundamentally care about facts.¹ More precisely, we'll assume that you care about value-facts. A *value-fact* is a fact that warrants certain affective and practical responses: certain emotions, desires, intentions, actions and forms of deliberation. That the Grand Canyon is beautiful, for instance, is a value-fact in our sense: it makes it fitting to feel awe, and gives us reason to protect the canyon. That the Grand Canyon is dangerous is also a value-fact in this sense: it makes it fitting to be slightly afraid, and gives us reason to plan carefully before we enter the canyon. In the same sense, that something is admirable, asinine or funny are value-facts. We'll say that you *care* about a value-fact if you do respond to it with the affective and practical responses 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're 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 don't feel anything at all: not an iota of grief tickles your breast. This seems too cold: you should care more about their death. But you can also care too

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's 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.

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

much about something. Imagine your football team loses, and you're utterly overcome with despair: you're laid low for days, consumed with anguish. This seems too warm: you should care less about that defeat. These two cases arise because how much you should care about a fact is partly proportional to the degree of its value. Things can be more or less valuable. And other things equal, you should care more about something the more valuable it is. Thus your attitude towards things should in part be a function of their value.

Yet how much you should care about a certain fact is not merely a function of that value. It's also a function of your relationship to the fact. In particular, 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 will say that a value-fact is *personally significant* to you when you have a special relationship towards it, and this makes it appropriate for you to care more about it than it would otherwise be. Our three cases exemplify this phenomenon. You should care especially about the fact that your neighbor is struggling, that your house might be destroyed, or that your work has failed. You should care more about them than about other, objectively similar value-facts, due to your relationship with them. But there are many more such cases: you should care more about the cuteness of your child than about the cuteness of some random child somewhere far off; more about the beauty of a sunset today than about that of a similar sunset a year ago; more about the injustice of racism in your town today than about its injustice in 3rd century Rome. In each case, intuitively, you have a special relationship with the first fact. And that's why you ought to care about it especially. It's why, in our parlance, it is personally significant to you. Our question is what makes a fact personally significant to you in this sense.

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'll 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 don't 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 don't (yet) have any such relationship with the book. Your reason to care about it is grounded in the billionaire's offer alone. We're 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

³ The idea that personal relationships are intensifiers is emphasized e.g. by Lord (2016) or Löschke (2017). It's also suggested e.g. in Jollimore (2011, 114), Keller (2013, 136) and Lazar (2016, 51).

work in our paradigmatic examples—your relationship to your neighbor, your childhood home, your 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’s stress something. As we’ve glossed the matter, it’s 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’s not to deny that there are important differences here. For instance, your reasons to care about different things will often be of different kinds. When you have a special relationship to a person, it’s typically *morally* inappropriate not to care about them. You do something morally wrong if you’re indifferent towards their value. When you have a special relationship to an object or project, moral considerations are less often at issue. Indifference towards the value of your house or proof will typically be an insensitivity to aesthetic, historical or prudential value. Still, a vast range of things can be personally significant. So we think that other things equal, it’s preferable to 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’s 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. Williams (1981a) 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 don’t care about your neighbor, house or proof, you won’t 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 will have special reasons

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

⁵ For this take on Williams, see Keller (2013, 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. his 1981b). One needn’t 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 (2004), Stroud (2010) and Drake (2020).

vis-à-vis these people. But this, we think, is wrong. If you've known your neighbor for decades, you'd just be wrong to treat her like a complete stranger. And your peculiar psychological attitudes don't 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's 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 good. Such a view is defended e.g. by Scheffler (1997; 2002; 2010; 2018).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's in the *thing itself*. If you treat Lynn like a complete stranger, the core problem isn't that you fail to value the relationship you have to her—your neighborhood or friendship. It's 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's so benevolent and kind. This kind of view is defended most prominently by Keller (2013).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 will be many people as benevolent and kind as Lynn. So *why* is it appropriate for you

⁶ A similar worry about subjectivism is articulated e.g. in Scheffler (2004) and Keller (2013, ch. 2). For more arguments, see e.g. Jeske (1997; 2008).

⁷ Related views are suggested e.g. by Raz (1989), Seglow (2013) or Lazar (2016).

⁸ See Keller (2013, 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're related to us) but facts singularly about them: their well-being, their mental states, their life.

⁹ Related ideas are defended e.g. by Velleman (1999), Lord (2016) or Naar (2017).

to care especially about her? Or why would it not be appropriate to care especially about an otherwise similar woman you've 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're acquainted with its individual properties or value. Here acquaintance is the kind of relationship 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 suggested e.g. by Setiya (2023).¹¹ Prima facie, it helps meet the challenge set out for the individualist view. We are, after all, only acquainted with certain things. So perhaps acquaintance views can explain why one should care about some things more than others. But we think 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 didn't work or of what this means for their overall research project, or might have forgotten some details of your own work. Still, you have a connection to your own proof that you cannot have to your colleagues: you *produced* it. You don't merely understand it, you made it. This is (at least part of) 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 Kolodny (2010a; 2010b), captures this active dimension. Kolodny thinks that our attitudes should be, in a special way, coherent. For instance, suppose the discrete encounters you've 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've had a prolonged history with her (2010a, 51). 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

¹⁰ Keller himself mentions this worry (2013, ch. 5). In response, he accepts a form of particularism (2013, 150–152). Many people have found this view unsatisfyingly non-explanatory (see e.g. Olson 2014, 624–626).

¹¹ Similar thoughts are explored e.g. in Jollimore (2011), Lewis (2023) and Kirwin (2023).

reason to step in for her while she's 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 (2010a, 52). Kolodny sees these cases as instances of a more general phenomenon, which he calls

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. (2010a, 47)

In our examples, you have reason to respond to Lynn's situation in a way that's similar to how you would respond to a stranger suffering or missing in the policy rally—but that reflects the fact that you've had a history of positive encounters ('Resonance of histories of encounter') and shared activism ('Resonance of common personal [...] situation') 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's 'merely a description of an abstract structure shared by principles' (2010a, 47) that do the actual explanatory work—like Resonance of histories of encounter or common personal situation. According to Kolodny, when we explain why you ought to be partial towards your neighbors, or your children or parents, we still need to invoke a host of substantively different actual principles—appealing sometimes to the normative import of responsibility, or to that of having an aim, and so on. Resonance provides a unified *form* of explanation, but it doesn't 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 which says in special relationships we respond to the value of that to which we're 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.

3. The answer

We start from a simple intuition. The unifying phenomenon at play in our examples is that you're in a kind of *contact* with the value of these things—the value

your former home or your mathematical proof, say. More precisely, you stand in passive contact with the value of that house: you've been affected by it. You stand in active contact with the value of your work: you have affected it yourself. You do not stand in such contact with the values of other buildings and intellectual endeavors. And that's why you ought to care especially about your home and your proof. More generally, there's a vast universe of value-facts out there. But you're in close active or passive contact with just a fraction of them. And a value-fact is significant to you insofar as you're in such contact with it.

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

We propose, therefore, that contact should be understood in terms of manifestation. Manifestation is a non-accidental 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'll 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'll 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's fragile and it is dropped.¹² 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 isn't the disposition to cause financial troubles. It's the disposition to shatter. So only the shattering manifests the

¹² For an overview on the metaphysics of dispositions, see Choi and Fara (2018).

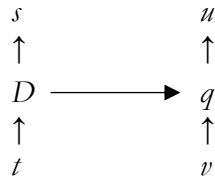
fragility. People's dispositions can also be manifest. Leonardo Da Vinci was disposed to produce beautiful artworks. The beauty of *The Last Supper* manifests this disposition. Joseph Stalin was disposed to mercilessly vanquish his enemies. Trotsky's death manifests this. Manifestation, in all these cases, is less accidental than brute causal connections. Thus, at a rough approximation, we'll say you're in contact with a value when your dispositions are actualized in it, or its dispositions are actualized in you.

But that's 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 that 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 need the notion of ground. Grounding is a notion of non-causal explanation. It is 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.¹³ Plausibly, the painting's beauty grounds its disposition to cause aesthetic experiences when looked at. Similarly, the fact that the poems are good grounds the fact that the criticism is unjust. Roughly, we want to say that manifestation is indifferent to such connections of ground. More precisely, let's say that p is *ground-theoretically connected* to q if and only if p grounds q or q grounds p .¹⁴ 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 . This definition picks out connections just as non-accidental as actualization. It precisely articulates our conception of manifestation, or of the kind of contact with value relevant to personal significance.

A little diagram may help to illustrate this notion:

¹³ For more on grounding in general, see Rosen (2010) and Fine (2012). 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 non-causal 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.

¹⁴ The relevant notion of ground is strict partial ground (see e.g. Fine 2012).



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

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, our view is the

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

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

Let's make two more clarifications. First, what do we mean by 'your life'? We're thinking of a life as a collection of facts. It includes all facts about what you ever

do, feel, see, believe, or desire. Thus, if you once wanted to complete a marathon, think running is a good test of character, or remember your marathons with fondness, those facts are part of your life. Your life also includes all the dispositions you ever had. So, if you're disposed to be exhausted for days after running a marathon, that's part of your life as well. This isn't a fully general account of what is a part of your life. But it gives us a reasonably good intuitive fix on it. Note, however, that according to the Contact Account, it's only your *current* life that matters to significance: you should care about something insofar as it's manifest in your life right now, or your life right now is manifest in it. So what matters is only your present beliefs, memories, abilities and so on. Past feelings, desires or dispositions are irrelevant. Imagine, say, that you visited Massachusetts as a small child. The state might have played a big role in your infancy. But suppose nothing about it is manifest in your current life, or vice versa: you haven't retained, say, fond memories of clam chowder or bad baseball. Then you shouldn't care especially about Massachusetts. It's only the present that counts.

Second, what sets the extent to which a value is manifest in your life and vice versa? We think this is (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, say, is grounded in both your love for your partner and your aversion to toads. But the former grounds it to a greater degree, and so is more central to it.¹⁵ 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.

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? We think that the force of this question is defused by seeing the wider import of contact with value. Adam Lovett and Stefan Riedener (2024a) argue 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. And, separately, they argue that it can furnish us with a theory of personal

¹⁵ The idea that grounding comes in degrees has not yet been explored in the literature. But it seems very intuitive. Also, it's quotidian to analogize grounding to causation (see e.g. Fine 2012), and causation clearly comes in degrees. So we see this lack of exploration as a shortcoming in the literature rather than the idea.

well-being (Lovett and Riedener 2024b). 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 Lovett and Riedener (2024a) and uses the same core ideology as the rest of this work. If these other claims are true, contact with value has a broad application across moral philosophy. One needn't, 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 needn't 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're inclined to take the Contact Account to state a fundamental fact, a place in the normative universe where the spade is turned. We're not opposed to a more fundamental explanation of the account, but we personally don't 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's now see how the it illuminates our initial examples.

4. People, objects and projects

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

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

A similar story also goes for other interpersonal relationships. Consider relationships between children and parents. Usually, parents' valuable properties are manifest in valuable parts of their children's lives and vice versa. A parent's concern for their offspring is manifest in that child's flourishing. The child's flourishing is manifest in their parent's joy. Their need for care is manifest in the parent's loving attention and the loving attention is manifest in the child's emotional development.¹⁶ Something similar is true of good friendships. Friends' valuable properties are manifest in valuable parts of their lives. Your friend takes joy from your conversational acumen. You get pleasure from their sharp wit. They profit from your stout dependability. You benefit from their empathy. You have disclosed your inner life to them and they have opened themselves up to you. More generally, when you have a special relationship to someone, you're especially in touch with their value and they're especially in touch with yours. That's why you should care more about your nearest and dearest than about people more distant from you.

Now let's see how this applies to objects and projects. Think about your childhood home. The fact that this house might be demolished is bad. Part of

¹⁶ For some related points, see Brighthouse and Swift (2009, 53–54).

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

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

These different domains of personal significance do differ somewhat. Relationships with people, for example, give rise to moral reasons whereas those with objects usually do not. Fortunately, the Contact Account can also respect these differences. The key point here is that different domains are associated with different kinds of value. People have moral value: their lives have moral import, their autonomy has moral weight, their virtues have moral worth. But objects and projects are less thoroughly infused with morality. Your projects typically have prudential value: the success of your proof would be prudentially good for you. Some objects have aesthetic value: your home might have been elegant, graceful or stunning. Moral value gives rise to moral reasons, but other sorts of value generate non-moral reasons. Thus, contact with the value of people will generally intensify your moral reasons while that with the value of objects and projects will more likely 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've sketched in section 2. Note that whether or not you're in a manifestation relation with something isn't 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're in contact with *their value*, not somehow because it's 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.

5. Beyond the core cases

Plausibly, the more explanatorily powerful a view is, the more seriously we should take it. So we now turn to how the Contact Account can illuminate some phenomena that go beyond our initial cases of personal significance.

We'll start with a case of chosen attachment. Above, we've claimed that personal significance isn't entirely subjective. *Inter alia*, that means you can't 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 will, typically, manifest that good. The Contact Account can, then, explain quite generally how we're able to choose our attachments. The crucial point is simply that contact with value needn't *always* be objective: it can consist in your own attitudes towards that value.

Let's consider a second case. Suppose you've 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 only been alive a few hours: she hasn't, one might think, had time to manifest her virtues in your life. Nonetheless, the Contact Account can explain why you should care more about your newborn daughter than about your longtime friends. For a start, you can choose your attachments. When you value your child's innocence or care about 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 it through pregnancy. This puts you in contact with the valuable features of your newborn, and that is why you should care about it especially. Contact with value is not only passive, but also active. Such active contact with value, we suspect, explains the significance of biological descent.

Let's turn to a third phenomenon. We've focused on cases of positive partiality: when you have reason to feel positively towards someone or something because of your special relationship with it. But there are also cases of negative partiality.¹⁷ 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 temper your desire that it go well, because you are in contact with their vices. More generally, negative partiality arises when you're in contact with someone's bad features. These features warrant negative rather than positive responses.

Consider a fourth case. The Contact Account, we've argued, can explain both positive and negative partiality. But some relations give rise to no duties of partiality at all. Think about hair number or skin color. The fact that you have the same number of hairs as a stranger doesn't give you any reason to care about them especially. The fact that you have the same skin color as someone else 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 doesn't 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 doesn't mean you should care about them especially.

We'll 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

¹⁷ For an illuminating recent discussion of negative partiality, see Brandt (2020) and Lange and Brandt (2023).

stranger. Yet such a passing acquaintance doesn't 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 doesn't 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 one's reason to save one stranger is typically neither weightier than, 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 won't usually disturb such incommensurability.¹⁸ But a passing acquaintance with someone only establishes a very mild form of contact. And so it only very mildly intensifies the reason you have to save their life. Thus these reasons will 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.¹⁹

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

6. Gratitude and compensation

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

We'll begin with gratitude. When someone benevolently benefits you, you should be grateful. This means, in part, that you should care especially about them doing

¹⁸ For a classic discussion of this point about 'small improvements', see e.g. Chang (1997).

¹⁹ 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 shouldn't let your passing acquaintance with someone affect whether you save their life. We'll let the reader decide whether they prefer this explanation or the one in the text.

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

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

These two cases raise a question. We say that, according to the Contact Account, you have extra reason to help those you should compensate or show gratitude. But, intuitively, you often don't 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's not just that we have special reason to care for our friends or children: we have an obligation to care for them. How do we get obligations out of such reasons? This question, clearly, isn't one that only the Contact Account faces. It can be asked of anybody who takes a reasons-first approach to ethics.²⁰ We believe one can pair the Contact Account with whatever view emerges

²⁰ For an especially thorough exploration of this view, see e.g. Schroeder (2021). For more on this debate, see e.g. Portmore (2011, ch. 5), Snedegar (2016) and Schmidt (2023a; 2023b).

as the most plausible from the debate on reasons-first views. We'll give an example. A standard view is that an action is morally required if and only if the moral reasons in favor of it outweigh all of the reasons, moral and nonmoral, in favor of any alternative.²¹ This view strikes us as plausible. If it's true, contact with value gives you duties or obligations when it intensifies the weight of your moral reasons to do something to such an extent that they outweigh your reasons to do otherwise.

7. Discounting

Let's further strengthen the case for the Contact Account by applying it to some cases of non-moral normativity—i.e., different cases of discounting. A familiar example is future-discounting: generally, we care less about things the more distant they are in the future. You're more excited about your trip to Mexico next week than about your trip to the Vatican in fifty years. You save more money now to spend on tomorrow's mole and Mayan ruins than you save to spend on far-off pizza and papal residencies. Past-discounting is just as familiar: generally, we care less about things the more distant they are in the past. When a relative dies, or you're deeply wronged, or one of your hopes is thwarted, you first feel intense grief, anger, disappointment, and are motivated to do a lot about it. But then the intensity of your emotions wanes, and you're no longer thus inclined to act.²² This, it seems, is as it should be. It's bizarre to care as much about a trip in fifty years as about one that starts next week. It's pathological to care unabated about past losses, injustices or disappointments without regard for the passage of time. The Contact Account can vindicate these phenomena too. It can let us understand these phenomena, too, as kinds of partiality.

Let us first see this with future-discounting. Recall that on the Contact Account, what matters is whether your *current* life is manifest in a fact or a fact manifest in your *current* life. Thus consider your near future. Many of your current dispositions will be manifest in the value of your upcoming weeks. The value of your Mexico trip will be grounded in the hikes and dives and parties you'll do. And these will manifest your current adventurousness, impetuosity or celebratory mood. So you should care a lot about them. Your far future may still manifest some of your current dispositions. The value of that distant Vatican trip might partly be grounded in your great future understanding of Renaissance art. And that understanding might be a distant manifestation of the curiosity that characterizes you already now. But you'll change over time, lose many of your current

²¹ This view is defended in de Kenessey (2023).

²² For prior discussion of this, see Marušić (2018; 2022), Callard (2017) and Na'aman (2021).

dispositions, and acquire new ones instead. Generally, fewer of your current dispositions will be manifest in things the more distant they are in the future. So you should care about your near future more. But that is just to vindicate future-discounting.

A parallel story applies to past-discounting. Imagine your friend died yesterday, an untimely death. The badness of this death is manifest in your current life in many ways. It is manifest in all the absences that they leave: in the conversations gone silent with their demise, the chess games for which you now lack a partner. You have yet to fill the void in your life that their departure is disposed to cause. It is also manifest in your emotional response: you currently feel an extreme grief and sense of loss. And this itself is a manifestation of the terrible tragedy of this death. But both of these things will wane over time: you get other friends, have other conversations and different chess partners. You think of their departure less and less and feel less intensely the pain of their loss. Generally, fewer dispositions related to a value-fact will be manifest in your life the more distantly that fact lies in the past. So you should care about the near past more. And that is just to vindicate past-discounting.

Finally, let's turn to a different, less familiar phenomenon: modal discounting. We treat close and remote possibilities differently. Imagine you're driving home from work. It is a wet and foggy night. Suddenly, a car comes in the other direction. They've gone around a corner too fast and are spinning out of control. You slam down on the brakes and only narrowly avoid a crash. You could have died. Now of course, every time you get in your car you could in principle die. But you care more about the modal fact when you narrowly avoid death than when death was only a 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 weren't at all close to dying, few grounds of the fact that you could have died are manifest in your life. Perhaps the facts that there were other drivers on the road, or that you don't have lightning reactions or an invulnerable body are manifest in your life. But these facts will be manifest in your life in the former case too. Thus, you're more in touch with the

close possibility than the remote one. You should care about it more. And this just is to explain modal discounting.

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

8. Conclusion

Let us conclude. We think the Contact Account 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 (514a–520a). In the *Symposium*, he suggested that we should follow the sweet call of eros, and beget good things (206a–212a). 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 Significance. We think both get at a magnetic, but elusive, idea. Both get at the sublimity of touching the good.

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