

# Commonsense morality and contact with value

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## Abstract

There seem to be many kinds of moral duties. We should keep our promises; we should pay our debts of gratitude; we should compensate those we've wronged; we should avoid doing or intending harm; we should help those in need. These constitute, some worry, an unconnected heap of duties: the realm of commonsense morality is a disorganized mess. In this paper, we outline a strategy for unifying commonsense moral duties. We argue that they can be understood in terms of contact with value. You are in contact with a value when you are manifest in it or when it is manifest in you. You have reason to get in contact with the good and avoid contact with evil. And when you're in contact with a value, the weight of the reasons it grounds are amplified for you. These ideas, we argue, can bring order to the chaos of commonsense morality.

## KEYWORDS

compensation, doing and allowing, gratitude, intending and foreseeing, promises

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Intuitively, there are many domains of morality. Beneficence is one such domain: we should generally try to help other people. When a child is drowning in front of you, you should save them. But, on the face of it, beneficence is not the only moral domain. We should also keep our

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promises. When you promise to pick a friend up from the airport, you should do so, even if it would do more good to spend the time working for effective charities. Equally, we should pay our debts of gratitude. When someone does a good thing for you, you should do good things for them. Conversely, we should compensate people when we wrong them. If you break someone's leg, you should pay for their medical bills. And we shouldn't do, or intend to do, harm. Indeed, it is worse to intend harm than to merely foresee it, and worse to do harm than to merely allow it. Intuitively, morality is pluralistic: there are many different kinds of moral reasons and they do not simply reduce to one another.

Some thinkers, most famously W.D. Ross, endorse the apparent pluralism of morality.<sup>1</sup> They hold that morality, most fundamentally, is constituted by irreducibly different kinds of moral reasons, or *prima facie* moral duties. On this sort of view, there is no unifying explanation of the multiple domains of commonsense morality. Yet many other writers have found such a pluralistic picture unsatisfying. The problem is that it seems to make morality an "unconnected heap of duties."<sup>2</sup> It robs us of any general explanation of what is right and wrong, and instead provides us with an inelegant collection of obligations. This is not to say that the only acceptable moral theories are wholly unified. Perhaps all wholly unified views are wildly counterintuitive, and so the best moral theory involves some pluralism. But, all else equal, disunity is a vice, and unity a virtue. A deeply pluralistic picture of morality has this vice in spades.

There have thus been many attempts to provide a unified theory of morality. These theories take one important feature of commonsense morality and try to explain the whole in terms of it. Utilitarianism is the unificatory theory *par excellence*. It says that the core of morality is beneficence. To act morally just is to make people's lives better. All moral reasons are to be explained in terms of doing good. Kantianism is an illustrious alternative. It says that the essence of morality is universalizability. To act morally is to act on maxims you could will all to follow.<sup>3</sup> Contractualism is another strong competitor. In its most prominent version it says that the unifying feature of morality is justifiability to others. To act morally is just to act in accordance with principles no one could reasonably reject.<sup>4</sup> These views have a great virtue: they escape the disunity of commonsense morality. But they all have other problems. Utilitarianism, for example, seems notoriously incapable of really recovering the verdicts of commonsense morality. Should one always break a promise when it is overall beneficial to do so? We doubt it.<sup>5</sup> Kantianism has difficulty articulating "maxims" in a way that yields remotely plausible results. It seems one could universalize the maxim of doing harm in one's very specific circumstances, but that doesn't make such harms permissible.<sup>6</sup> And contractualism, or so some contend, is unable to explain commonsense morality without appealing to independent deontic facts. What is reasonable to reject seems to depend on what we have moral reason to do.<sup>7</sup>

We find these critiques of existing views broadly convincing. No extant account of commonsense moral thought, we think, is fully satisfactory. But our aim, in this paper, is constructive,

<sup>1</sup> See Ross (2002[1930]).

<sup>2</sup> For the term, and a critical discussion of the charge, see McNaughton (1996).

<sup>3</sup> See Kant (2011[1785]).

<sup>4</sup> This is Scanlon's (1998) version of contractualism.

<sup>5</sup> For this point, see Ross (2002[1930], 18). For a more general, classic, discussion see Williams (1973).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Parfit (2011, 275-320) for this point.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Parfit (2011, 360-366) for discussion.

not critical. We want to explore whether a different feature of commonsense morality can unify the whole. That feature is special relations. Intuitively, you have a special relation to the person to whom you've promised something, the person who benefited you, the person you've harmed in the past or the person you intend to harm. That seems to matter to the import of promises, gratitude, compensation or non-malevolence. In fact, Ross thought this was the common thread of non-utilitarian ethics.<sup>8</sup> But Ross didn't try to unify morality in terms of special relations. And, as far as we know, no one has so far tried to do so. Many people have discussed general features of relational morality—such as directed obligations, accountability or second-personal respect.<sup>9</sup> But we know of no attempts to unify different moral domains in terms of a specific account of a special relation. In this paper, we make such an attempt.

Our view is that our moral reasons can be understood in terms of contact with value. When one thinks of morally important relations, it is natural to think of interpersonal relationships—friendship, marriage, co-citizenship. But these are not our focus. We contend that one has important relations not just to people, but to specific good and bad things. For instance, you're in close contact with the suffering of a person you've harmed. Their suffering manifests your recklessness or ill will. You don't have the same kind of relation to the suffering of people whom you've never affected. Similarly, you're in close contact with the virtue of those who benefit you. Their good will is manifest in your experiences. You don't have the same kind of relation to the virtue of strangers on the other side of the planet. Our core idea is that these differing relationships, this contact with specific goods and bads, shapes the landscape of your reasons. It does so in two ways. The first way is *reactive*: you have especially weighty reason to react to values with which you're already in contact. The second way is *proactive*: you have reason to get into contact with the good and avoid being in contact with the bad. We call this the Contact Account of commonsense morality (sections 2–3). We think it can provide a unified account of our reasons of compensation (section 4), gratitude (section 5), promise-keeping (section 6) and non-maleficence (section 7). Ross thought that these domains exhausted non-utilitarian morality. Perhaps that is false; perhaps there are further domains of ethics. Yet these are extremely important domains, so a unified account of them is of great import.

Let's be explicit about our methodology. A good account of gratitude, say, will explain how gratitude works. Various principles govern our reasons of gratitude. For example, you have weightier reasons to benefit those who benefited you supererogatorily than those who had a duty to help you. A good account of gratitude will explain the truth of these principles. The same is true of compensation, promises and non-maleficence. Now of course, it's contentious what principles govern any moral domain. Some people, for example, deny that you owe more gratitude for supererogatory beneficence. But we take it that, *prima facie*, this is plausible. A view that explains such appearances is better than one that does not. Overall, we evaluate theories both on how well they explain our moral judgements and on their theoretical virtues—their coherence, elegance and simplicity. We think the Contact Account of commonsense morality does well on these metrics. Of course, this theory, like its competitors, is no doubt not fully satisfactory—but we hope it is at least a start on a more satisfactory theory of commonsense morality. Let us then spell out its core notions.

<sup>8</sup> As he put it: “The essential defect of [utilitarianism] is that it ignores [...] the highly personal character of duty” (2002[1930], 22).

<sup>9</sup> See most prominently Darwall (1996) or Wallace (2019)—or perhaps also the ethics of care in the tradition of Gilligan (1982) or Noddings (1984).

## 2 | CONTACT WITH VALUE

We'll start by clarifying what 'value' means to us. We agree with utilitarians that the world is full of valuable things. But we think it's not just well-being and ill-being that are valuable. Consider a beautiful painting or a loving relationship. Both ground certain reasons. You have reason to appreciate the painting and to protect the relationship. Consider, also, a piercing pain or an unjust institution. These also ground such reasons. You have reason to alleviate the pain or to rectify the injustice. The reasons, in these cases, are both practical and affective: they are reasons to do certain things and have certain emotions. You should both try to alleviate someone's pain and have an emotional response to their being in pain: you should regret it, you should feel sorry for them. And these reasons are, in a certain sense, noninstrumental. You don't have reason to alleviate pain due to the distant causal consequences of such alleviation; you have reason to do so because pain is bad in itself. Most generally, we'll say that a *value fact* is a fact that grounds a noninstrumental practical or affective reason. As these examples suggest, value facts can be both good and bad. Good value facts, such as the fact that a relationship is loving, warrant positive responses. Bad value facts, such as the fact that an institution is unjust, warrant negative responses. Generally, anything which grounds some such reason is a value in our sense.

Next, let's clarify the relation of 'contact', or the kind of relation we think has special normative import. To convey a sense of this notion, consider the idea that if you already are in contact with value, this intensifies your reasons with respect to it. This idea seems intuitive, even outside of morality. Take art. You are in closer contact with a beautiful painting you look at every day than with one you've never really laid eyes on. This gives you weightier reason to appreciate the former painting, or to protect it if it's in danger. Here your contact with the painting's beauty is passive: it impinges itself on you. Similarly, suppose you write an eloquent book. You are in closer contact with your book than you are with someone else's. This gives you weightier reason to try to publish your book than similar books by others, or to regret the manuscript's rejection by a publisher. Here your contact with your book's eloquence is active: it flows from your own capacities. Both sorts of contact seem to intensify the weight of your reasons grounded in the relevant values.

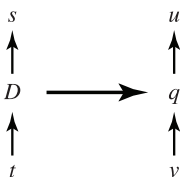
Let us pursue a more precise understanding of 'contact'. A straightforward idea is that contact is a causal notion: you are in contact with the things that causally affect you and with the things that you causally affect. You're in contact with the painting's beauty because your aesthetic experience is a causal product of that beauty. You're in contact with your book's eloquence because it is the causal product of your own actions. This idea is simple and elegant; tenable, unfortunately, it is not. You are causally connected with many things to which you lack a normatively relevant sort of contact. Imagine that a thousand years ago two of your ancestors were transfixed by the beauty of some church. They met while admiring it, fell in love, and a thousand years later you were born. The beauty of the church was a key causal contributor to your existence: had it not been for it, you would never have come to be. But that does not intensify your reasons grounded in this beauty. You don't need to feel any special aesthetic response to that church. A simple causal account of contact, then, seems implausible. Causal connections are often too contingent or accidental to be fit for our purposes.

We need a less accidental connection between you and value. We propose to understand this connection in terms of manifestation. Manifestation is primarily understood in terms of dispositions. Consider salt's solubility. The solubility of some salt is its disposition to dissolve when you put it in water. Here its being in water is the *stimulus condition* of the disposition and its dissolving is its *manifestation condition*. The former is the thing that activates, or stimulates, the

latter.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when you put salt in water, and it dissolves, the dissolution manifests the solubility. When you drink the water and throw up, that does not manifest the solubility of salt. It is merely a causal consequence of it. Or consider the fragility of a vase. When you drop a vase and it shatters, the shattering manifests the vase's fragility. When the shopkeeper scolds you for breaking their vase, this is caused by the fragility but does not manifest it. People's dispositions can also be manifest. Michelangelo was disposed to produce beautiful artworks when given the time and resources: the beauty of the *Pietà* manifests this disposition. Lyndon B. Johnson was disposed to bully those he had power over: him berating his subordinates manifests that. Gandhi was disposed to eschew violence even in the face of deep provocation: the nonviolence of the Indian independence movement manifests this disposition. Paradigmatically, then, manifestation is the non-accidental connection between dispositions and their manifestation conditions. We will say that you're in contact with a value when your dispositions are manifest in that value, or when that value's dispositions are manifest in you.

Let us say a bit more about manifestation. Here we want to distinguish a few different notions. We start with actualization. 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 salt's dissolving actualizes its solubility when it dissolves because it's soluble and it is in water. Plausibly, manifestation is a little more than mere actualization. To see this, consider again the beauty of a painting. One might think this beauty is not itself the disposition to cause aesthetic experiences in people that look at the painting. The beauty and this disposition are not identical. Yet, still, those aesthetic experiences do, in a perfectly natural sense, manifest the painting's beauty. To capture this, we now introduce 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.<sup>11</sup> Plausibly, the painting's beauty grounds its disposition to cause aesthetic experiences when looked at: the existence of the disposition is non-causally explained by the beauty. 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  $p$ . 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.

It will help to illustrate this notion diagrammatically. In the following diagram, upward arrows stand for the grounding relation and the horizontal arrow stands for actualization:



Here  $t$  grounds disposition  $D$ ,  $D$  grounds  $s$ ;  $v$  grounds  $q$ , and  $q$  grounds  $u$ ; and  $q$  actualizes  $D$ . So  $u$ ,  $q$  and  $v$  manifest  $s$ ,  $D$  and  $t$ . Thus, for example, imagine you look at a beautiful painting and have an aesthetic experience. The painting is disposed to cause aesthetic experiences ( $D$ )

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

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

and this disposition is grounded by (rather than identical with) the painting's beauty ( $t$ ). Thus, when that disposition is actualized by your aesthetic experiences ( $q$ ), these experiences manifest the beauty. Alternatively, imagine you cruelly berate someone, causing them pain. Here we can think of your cruelty ( $D$ ) as a disposition that is actualized in your victim's pain ( $q$ ). Suppose, additionally, that the pain fits into a more general story of your victim's oppression ( $u$ ): they are often bullied. Then your cruelty is manifested in their more general oppression. This identifies the notion of manifestation that puts you in contact with a value. Heuristically, it is almost always unproblematic to think of manifestation as the simple connection between a disposition and its actualization. But our official, more involved, characterization of manifestation invokes ground-theoretic connections. Contact with value flows through this notion of manifestation.

We've spelt out what 'value' and what 'contact' is, but what is it for 'you' to come into contact with a value? Who are you, anyway? In answering this question, we don't aim to provide an account of who you are that is fit for all purposes. We don't, for example, aim to contribute to the literature on personal identity or the metaphysics of persons with our account of 'you'. We merely aim to provide a quasi-technical account that helps underwrite the extensional plausibility of the Contact Account. In this sense, we take you to be the sum total of your experiences, attitudes, actions and dispositions. You are what you think, feel, see, desire, do or are disposed to do. One can think of this as a collection of facts. There are facts about what attitudes, actions and dispositions you have or have had: these facts together make up who you are. That you raised a child, love cats or once felt the pain of a broken toe are each part of what makes you you. That you were adventurous in your youth and will be pusillanimous in old age are part of who you are. For our purposes, you are the collection of facts about your experiences, attitudes, actions and dispositions. When one of these facts makes contact with a value, we say that *you* are in contact with that value.

Your contact with a value, in sum, involves three elements: the two relata—'you' and the 'value'—and the relevant relation itself—the relation of 'contact'. Let's clarify one final thing about this relation. In our view, contact comes in degrees: you can be in more or less contact with a value. This is because both actualization and grounding come in degrees. On degreed actualization, think about when a vase shatters because you dropped it versus when it shatters because you dropped a truck on it; the former is more an actualization of its fragility than the latter. This itself should likely be understood in terms of causal contribution: the more of a causal contribution a disposition makes towards its own manifestation condition, the more that manifestation condition actualizes the disposition. On degreed grounding, consider the magnificence of the *The Godfather* films. This is grounded to a greater degree in Al Pacino's performance than in Sofia Coppola's; the former is more responsible for the magnificence than the latter. This allows us to define a notion of centrality. A fact is more central to you insofar as it makes a bigger ground-theoretic contribution to who you are; a fact is more central to a value insofar as it makes a bigger ground-theoretic contribution to the value. Our view is that you are more closely connected to a value when things more central to you are manifest to a greater degree in things more central to the value, or vice versa. Thus the extent to which you are in contact with a value is a function of the magnitude of certain actualization and grounding relationships.

### 3 | THE CONTACT PRINCIPLES

We can now state the two principles that make up the Contact Account of commonsense morality. Let  $p$  be some value fact. Our first principle is the

**Reactive Contact Principle:** The weight of the reasons grounded by  $p$  are amplified for you to the extent that you are in contact with  $p$ .

This principle says that your contact with a value increases the weight of the noninstrumental practical or affective reasons this value grounds: you have weightier reason to respond to values you're in contact with than to respond to equal values with which you lack such contact. So, for example, you have more reason to protect the painting you've appreciated many times than a painting you barely know. And you have more reason to regret the rejection of your manuscript than the rejection of someone else's. In both cases, your contact with a value amplifies the weight of the reasons it grounds.

Our second principle is the

**Proactive Contact Principle:** To the extent that  $p$  is good, you have reason to put yourself in contact with  $p$ , and to the extent that  $p$  is bad, you have reason to avoid being in contact with  $p$ .

This principle says that you have reason to put yourself in touch with the good and isolate yourself from evil. So, for example, suppose you haven't yet looked at this beautiful painting or written your eloquent book. Both the painting and your book are (or would be) good. Looking at the painting would put you in contact with the former good, and writing your book would put you in contact with the latter. Thus, by the proactive principle, you have a reason to look at the painting and write your book. In both cases, your actions can put yourself in contact with the good.<sup>12</sup>

How are these principles connected? We think they're metaphysically independent, in the sense that neither grounds the other. But there are logical connections between them. To show this, we need two further principles. On the one hand, we need a principle linking reasons for attitudes to those for action. This says that if, were you to do something, you would have reason of a specific weight to be glad (regret) that you did it, then you actually have reason of such weight (not) to do that thing.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, we need a transmission principle: that, if you have reason of some weight to be glad about (regret) something, then you have reason of that weight to be glad about (regret) anything that made it the case that you have such reason. With these principles in hand, the Reactive Contact Principle implies the Proactive Contact Principle. Here's how. When something is good, you have reason to be glad about it. When something is bad, you have reason to regret it. By the Reactive Contact Principle, when you get in contact with a value, these reasons are amplified. So, by the transmission principle, were you to put yourself in contact with a good (bad), you would have weighty reason to be glad about (regret) having put yourself in contact with that good (bad). But then, by the linkage between actions and attitudes, you actually have weighty reason to put yourself in contact with goods and avoid putting yourself in contact with bads. And that is the Proactive Contact Principle. So the contact principles form a logically coherent picture of normative reality (although neither grounds the other).

<sup>12</sup> Note that both principles are about our reasons in general, not just about our moral reasons. We think these principles are true in this generality. But in the present paper, we're only concerned with their application in the moral domain. For their application in other domains, see e.g. Lovett and Riedener ([unpublished-a](#); [unpublished-b](#)). For the distinction between moral and nonmoral reasons, see section 8.

<sup>13</sup> There's some similarity between this principle and so-called 'reflection principles' (Arntzenius 2008).

This connection allows us to illuminate the relative weight of the different reasons the contact principles generate. We think that the weight of your proactive reasons (not) to come into contact with  $p$  corresponds to the weight of the reactive reasons you *would* have to respond to  $p$  *were* you in contact with  $p$  in that way. Let's illustrate this idea with our examples. Suppose you've written your book. By the Reactive Principle, you have a reason to desire to publish it: such a desire is a fitting response to its value. In addition, suppose you contemplate destroying that beautiful painting. By the Proactive Principle, you have a reason not to do that: doing so would put you in contact with the bad of the painting's destruction. Now, if you *were* to destroy that painting, you would have a reactive reason to desire that you hadn't done that. And suppose that, in that case, it would be fitting for your desire not to have destroyed the painting to be equally as strong as your desire to publish your manuscript. Then your proactive reason not to destroy that painting is equally as strong as your reactive reason to publish your manuscript. So proactive and reactive reasons are comparable in weight.

These principles will together make up a cohesive account of commonsense ethics. Now one might wonder *why* each principle is true. We're inclined to take them to be fundamental. Every conception of morality must reach explanatory bedrock somewhere. We suspect the contact principles are that bedrock. They express the intuitive idea that the kind of relation in which you stand to a value matters. This is a basic normative fact, that's not in turn explained by anything. Of course, one might still challenge the contact principles. Perhaps they rely on too pluralistic a picture of values, or they suggest that harms done out of character are not wrong, or they imply you should avoid learning about evil. We'll address these objections in section 8. But, for now, let us turn to our argument for these principles: they provide an elegant explanation of how compensation, gratitude, promises and non-maleficence work.

## 4 | COMPENSATION

We'll start with a vignette. Imagine you are driving home after a long day. It is dark and wet. You make a right turn. You hear a bump, and your heart hits the roof of your mouth. You hadn't properly checked your mirror, and you've knocked over a cyclist. You stop quickly and get out of the car. They're injured. You call an ambulance. It later becomes clear that you've broken their leg. In this case, you should compensate the cyclist: you should make their life better because of the harm you've inflicted on them. Specifically, you have stronger reason to help this particular cyclist than to help an injured cyclist you had nothing to do with. Additionally, your compensation should fit their harm. It would be odd to just buy them a vacation in Hawaii or finance the couples therapy they're undergoing with their partner. It's their leg you've broken, so that's what you should fix. You should pay for their medical bills. A slight modification of the vignette illustrates a third principle about compensation. Suppose that hitting the cyclist was not accidental: you did it in order to knock them out of an upcoming cycling race, and help a good friend of yours win it instead. Your friend does win the competition, and with it \$10,000. Here, it's not just you, but also your friend who has special reason for compensating the cyclist. When someone benefits from the wrongdoing of others, they should compensate the person wronged.<sup>14</sup>

Our aim is to explain these three features of compensation. Let's start with the first and most basic point: when you harm someone, you have special reason to compensate them. You have

<sup>14</sup> For more about compensation, see e.g. Walker (2006) or Radzik (2009). For the idea of compensatory duties after benefiting from someone's wrongdoing, see e.g. Butt (2007) or Goodin and Barry (2014).



weightier reason to help them than to help someone whom you haven't harmed. This derives from the fact that, when you harm someone, that generally puts you in contact with a bad. In the above vignette, your carelessness consisted, in part, in the disposition to knock over cyclists when turning. That disposition is manifest in the cyclist's broken leg. So this puts you in contact with the bad of that injury. The same point applies very broadly when you harm someone. Suppose your anger causes you to break someone's nose, your financial irresponsibility causes someone to go bankrupt, or your callousness causes emotional hurt. In each of these cases your dispositions are manifest in some sort of injury: a physical, financial or emotional injury. And that puts you in contact with these bads. Yet when something is bad, we have reason to get rid of it. The badness of a broken leg gives us reason to help the person who suffers it. And so, according to the Reactive Contact Principle, you have an especially weighty reason to help the people you've harmed. This reason is weightier than your reason to help people that were harmed in other ways, because you're in closer contact with the injuries you inflicted yourself.

Now, this doesn't mean you always have very strong reasons to compensate those whom you've harmed. Consider, for instance, a harm to which your victim has consented. Suppose you fought a professional boxing match, and broke your opponent's nose. Then, you still seem to have some special reasons to help them. If you have a choice, say, between helping your opponent and helping another professional boxer who got equally injured in another match by someone else, it seems you should favor your victim. However, your reasons of compensation are much weaker than if your victim never consented to being punched. The Contact Account can explain this as follows. Generally, harms to which the victim consented are less impersonally bad than harms to which they didn't consent. Suppose you're an uninvolved third party, and come across two people with a broken nose: the first is a professional boxer, who had consented to fighting a match; the other simply became the victim of an unconsented assault. Intuitively, you have stronger reasons to help the latter. According to the Reactive Contact Principle, when you are manifest in a value fact, the reasons it grounds are amplified for you. Thus, you'll have stronger reasons to compensate your victim if you broke their nose without their consent than if you broke it in a fight to which they agreed.

Let's turn to the second aspect of compensation: that compensation should fit the harm. Again, if the cyclist is also having troubles with their spouse, it wouldn't really be appropriate to help them fix their marriage rather than their leg. Reasons of compensation are not generalized reasons to improve the lives of people you've harmed. They're reasons to get rid of the specific bads you've put into their lives. The explanation of this is simply that it's these specific bads that you're in contact with. You're not in contact with the cyclist's marital troubles. These troubles don't manifest any of your dispositions. It's the broken leg that does. And so, by the Reactive Contact Principle, you have special reason to pay for the cyclists' medical bills, but not to help them with their marriage. The point generalizes: when you harm someone, you put yourself in contact with a specific bad. It's that bad you have special reason to erase, and in this sense compensation should fit the harm.

We now look at the third aspect of compensation. You have special reasons to compensate people who were wronged if you benefited from that wrongdoing. Again, the Reactive Contact Principle can explain this. Consider your friend, who won the competition because you broke that cyclist's leg. Here, part of what grounds the badness of the broken leg is the cyclist's inability to compete in that competition. This inability is a disposition: the disposition, among other things, to remain at home when the race starts, and to have to let other people win it. This disposition is manifest in the victory of your friend. In other words, the badness of the injury of that cyclist is manifest in the victory of your friend. So your friend has a special reason to care about this badness: to alleviate it or pay for the cyclist's medical care. This point also generalizes. When

you benefit from a wrongdoing, very often your benefit manifests a harm done to whoever was wronged. This puts you in contact with that harm, and thus gives you special reason to ameliorate it. So, when you benefit from a wrongdoing, very often you should compensate the person wronged.

The Reactive Contact Principle, thus, helps us explain three core features of compensation. Let us make a further point at this juncture. In all our explanations we rely on claims about what values and dispositions there are, what grounds them, and about what manifests the dispositions. We think all of these claims are independently plausible. But we also think they draw plausibility from the coherence of the overall picture. The fact that certain tenable claims about manifestation, for example, help us explain the nature of compensation gives us some evidence for these claims. These claims are mutable points in the dynamics of reflective equilibrium. So, in that spirit, we can turn to how the Contact Account can illuminate gratitude.

## 5 | GRATITUDE

Imagine you're walking home late at night, and someone starts hassling you. You're worried about your safety: you think your unwelcome interlocutor could turn violent at any minute. A stranger sees the situation and walks over. They're concerned about your well-being and so they ask you if you're being bothered. The intervention dissuades your interlocutor: they walk away. You should be grateful to the stranger. You should feel especially positively towards them, and you should be especially disposed to do them good in return, if you can. If you see them in trouble in some future night, you should walk over and try to help them. This illustrates the core feature of gratitude: when someone benefits you benevolently, out of concern for your well-being, you have reason to be grateful to them. If the stranger had benefited you out of self-interest, merely because they wanted you to owe them a favor, you would have no debt of gratitude to them.<sup>15</sup> Notice, further, that being benefited supererogatorily amplifies the weight of your reasons of gratitude. If the stranger went beyond the call of duty in benefiting you, if they had no obligation at all to intervene in your situation, you should show them more gratitude. In this section, we will explain these features of gratitude.

Let's start with the core feature: that benevolently bestowed benefits generate debts of gratitude. Benevolence consists in a concern for people's well-being. Such a concern consists, in part, in the disposition to help people out when you see that they are in trouble. Thus, when the stranger helps you, your experience of being helped manifests these dispositions. So that puts you in contact with their benevolence. The key further idea is that benevolence grounds certain reasons. Specifically, benevolent people deserve good things. We have weighty reason to help out benevolent people and to feel positively towards their life going well. To see this, think about how you should respond to two lives: a good life lived by a benevolent person, and a good life lived by someone who never acts to help others. You should be more pleased by the first life, and more disposed to bring it about. By the Reactive Contact Principle, when you're in contact with someone's benevolence, the weight of these reasons is amplified. Thus, when someone benefits you out of benevolence, you have especially weighty reason to want their life to go well and to help them out. Thus we have reasons of gratitude when we're benefited benevolently. We can contrast this with a self-interested motivation. Suppose someone benefits you just because they want you to benefit them in return. This puts you in contact with this person's self-interest. But that someone is self-interested doesn't

<sup>15</sup> For this kind of claim, see Berger (1975).

ground reasons to care about them. So we can explain the core feature of gratitude: being benefited specifically out of benevolence gives us reason to be grateful to our benefactor.

We now turn to the fact that you should show more gratitude to benefactors who went beyond their duty in helping you. We explain this similarly. When someone benefits you supererogatorily, they have a disposition to do more than morality requires of them. They show, at least when benevolently motivated, a small measure of moral saintliness. This disposition is manifest in your experience of being benefited. Thus, you are in contact with their moral saintliness. But moral saints deserve good things. Compare two lives: a good life lived by someone who often acts supererogatorily, and a good life lived by someone who never does more than they morally need to. You should be more pleased by the first life than the second, and more disposed to bring it about. Thus, we have reason to help those who are disposed to go beyond the call of duty, at least when they are appropriately motivated. So by the Reactive Contact Principle, when someone benevolently benefits you supererogatorily, you have especially weighty reason to make their life go well. The weight of your general reason to help out the morally saintly is increased by your contact with your benefactor's specific saintliness. The Contact Account, then, can explain how benevolence and supererogation matter to gratitude.

The Contact Account also illuminates a third aspect of gratitude. We've been discussing what's sometimes called prepositional gratitude. This is gratitude *to* someone. But there is also a notion of *propositional* gratitude. You can simply be grateful that something is the case rather than grateful *to* someone. Suppose you've spent many days immersed in the beauty of the Grand Canyon. In this case, we shouldn't say you're grateful *to* the Canyon for being so beautiful. Rather, you're grateful *that* it is. Prepositional and propositional gratitude are distinct. Yet, they seem to have something in common: we at least use the same word to refer to both, and phenomenologically they seem similar. But what do they have in common?<sup>16</sup> The answer, we think, is that both involve you being in contact with something good. To be immersed in the Grand Canyon's beauty is to be in contact with that beauty. By the Reactive Contact Principle, such contact gives you especially weighty reasons to appreciate and protect that beauty. This is similar to your especially weighty reason to protect your benefactors: both derive from the fact that non-accidentally benefiting from something puts you in contact with its value. So, the Contact Account can explain the connection between prepositional and propositional gratitude.

It appears to us, then, that the Reactive Contact Principle sheds substantial light on how gratitude works. At this point, we want to make a general remark about the Contact Account. The Contact Account, like utilitarianism, is in some sense a value-first account of morality: it explains moral phenomena in terms of values. But, unlike utilitarianism, it is an agent-relative theory. And it doesn't always direct us to *promote* the good, but to honor or respect it in other ways. Utilitarianism explains moral phenomena in terms of an agent-neutral duty to maximize value simpliciter, whereas the Contact Account explains them in terms of a variety of agent-relative responses to specific values. Both approaches emphasize values, but they're fundamentally different.

## 6 | PROMISES

Suppose you promise to pick up a friend from the airport. Having made the promise gives you special reason to do so. What explains this? One might think that this brooks no explanation: it's a basic, fundamental fact that we should keep our promises. But that seems peculiar: intuitively, we

<sup>16</sup> For discussion of this distinction, see McAleer (2012) and Manela (2016).

should be able to explain promissory reasons in some way. And if we're able to explain gratitude and compensation in more fundamental terms, this intuition seems doubly strong: it seems especially peculiar to think promissory reasons are more basic than these other domains. Moreover, it seems plausible that we should be able to explain promissory reasons in terms of interests. Keeping your promises serves people's interests, and this is why you should do so. Tellingly, most of the literature on promising articulates some version of this view. Some people think that the interest underpinning promissory reasons is an interest in having our expectations satisfied.<sup>17</sup> Others think that it's an interest in managing our relationships.<sup>18</sup> And some think that it's an interest in not acting out of line with our joint intentions.<sup>19</sup> So, this basic intuition is widespread: promissory obligations brook an explanation in terms of the interests of the promisee.

Unfortunately, this intuition is difficult to vindicate. The key issue is that me having an important interest in your doing something simply doesn't imply that you have a weighty reason to do it. This is for two reasons. First, not all of my interests give you weighty reasons. Suppose I have a weighty interest in your dropping out of a job interview, since you're my competition. This doesn't give you a weighty reason to drop out. Second, although I might have an important interest in your doing something, other people might have more important interests in you not doing it. These contrary interests have to be weighed against my own, and beneficence will generally direct you to do what promotes people's interests most overall. So it's unclear how to vindicate the intuition that promises can be explained in terms of interests. Why does the promisee's interest give you a weighty reason, or a weightier reason than similar interests by others?

The Reactive Contact Principle can explain this. At an abstract level, the crucial thought is that, when you make a promise to someone, you put yourself into contact with the special interest underpinning promises. This interest, whatever it is, grounds reasons: specifically, it grounds reasons to do the things you said you would do. Thus, you have special reason to keep your promises. Let's illustrate this with some concrete theories. Consider the view that the interest underpinning promissory obligations is that in having expectations satisfied. When you promise someone that you'll do something, you typically raise their expectations that you'll do it. Their raised expectations are a manifestation of your abilities: specifically, the ability to make people promises. They wouldn't have the expectations if you hadn't made the promise. But, on the view under discussion, that someone expects you to do something gives you a reason to do it. Usually, this would be a relatively lightweight reason. But, when the expectation manifests your abilities, by the Reactive Contact Principle that amplifies the weight of this reason. Thus, you have weighty reason to keep your promises. Similarly, consider relational theories. These say that when you break a promise to someone, you damage your relationship with them, and their interest in preserving that relationship underpins promissory reasons. The fact that it would damage your relationship not to do what you promised is a manifestation of your ability to make commitments: it wouldn't damage the relationship had you not made a promise. Additionally, this fact about relational damage grounds a reason to do as you promised. Thus, given the Reactive Contact Principle, when you've promised someone something you have especially weighty reason to do it. So both these theories illustrate the explanatory force of the Contact Account. Let's be clear; we're not endorsing either theory. We just use them to showcase how the Contact Account can explain why promissory obligations are underpinned by interests.

<sup>17</sup> For different versions of this view, see Thomson (1990), Scanlon (1998, ch.7) and Kolodny and Wallace (2003).

<sup>18</sup> For this sort of view, see Shiffrin (2008).

<sup>19</sup> This is a slight twist on the view in Gilbert (2013).

There are two further features of promising that the Contact Account sheds light on. First, promises give rise to secondary obligations. Suppose you break your promise to pick your friend up from the airport. This doesn't free you from any special reasons towards your friend. At a minimum, you should tell them you won't be able to pick them up and apologize for breaking your promise. More expansively, you have special reason to avoid them being harmed by your promise-breaking: to pay for their taxi, say.<sup>20</sup> This is all because you remain in contact with the promise-underpinning interest even when you've broken your promise. You remain in contact with people's interest in being able to manage their relationships, have their expectations satisfied or whatever that interest is. But this interest still generates reasons after the promise-breaking. Specifically, you have reason to repair the damage represented by the frustration of this interest. So you have especially weighty reason to repair the harm that you caused. Consider how this works on the expectational view. When you jilt your friend, how bad the frustration of their expectations is depends on the cost to them of getting home from the airport. By mitigating this cost, through paying for their taxi, you mitigate the harm that you've caused. This gives you secondary reasons even when you've acted against your primary reasons to keep the promise.

Second, some promises are weightier than others. Promises to your nearest and dearest are weightier than promises to complete strangers. Other things equal, it's worse to break a promise to your mother than to a salesperson. Also, promises whose violation causes more harm are weightier than promises whose violation is more harmless. It's worse to jilt your friend at the airport when this means that they have to walk for two hours than when it just means they must take a twenty-minute bus. The former fact holds because we're in closer contact with the interests of our friends and family members than with those of strangers. That includes whatever general principles underpin the fact that we have interests implicated in promising. For example, perhaps it is important to have our expectations satisfied because we're autonomous. Well, you're in closer contact with the autonomy of your nearest and dearest than with the autonomy of perfect strangers. So your promises to friends and family members are weightier. The second of these facts holds because the weightier is the interest you're in contact with, the weightier will be the resulting reason. The weight of this interest is in part modulated by how serious its frustration is, and so that seriousness impacts the weight of a promise.

In sum, then, the Reactive Contact Principle illuminates why interests underpin promises, how promises give rise to secondary reasons, and which promises are weightier than others. Now, we don't claim to have explained every feature of promises here, or indeed every feature of the other domains we discuss. For example, promises seem invalid when coerced, or if the promisee doesn't accept them. We haven't tried to explain that in this section. But we think the success the Contact Account has in explaining the features of promising we've focused on is reason enough to think it plays an important role in understanding promises.

## 7 | NON-MALEFICENCE

Imagine that you're a bomber pilot in a just war. It may be permissible to bomb a munitions factory with the aim of disrupting wartime production, even if you foresee that ten civilians will die as a result of the bombing. But it would be impermissible to bomb a housing estate with the intention of killing ten civilians in order to damage the enemy's morale. Usually, we have weightier reason to avoid bringing about intended harm than to avoid bringing about merely foreseen harm. This

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Riedener and Schwind (2022).

is, of course, the well-known Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE)—plausibly, an important part of commonsense morality.<sup>21</sup> Yet the doctrine is also somewhat puzzling. For a start, there's a question about why this distinction matters in the first place. If you're knowingly bringing about some harm, why can it be relevant whether you're intending or merely foreseeing to do so? Harm is harm, one might think. But furthermore, there's a question about when exactly the distinction matters. Sometimes, it seems, it doesn't. To see this, imagine that you're stuck in a cave and a man is wedged in the exit. He is blocking your escape. You blow him into pieces with dynamite, clearing your way out. You say you only intended to blow the man into pieces, and merely foresaw that this would lead to his death. This isn't a sound defense of your actions. The man's death and you blowing him up are too closely connected for the distinction between intending and foreseeing to matter here. So, when exactly is the distinction normatively important? Our main aim in this section is to show that the Contact Account can answer these questions—or provide an account of the DDE.

We'll start with the case in which the distinction between intending and foreseeing does matter morally. Here we rely on the observation that intentions are just bundles of practical dispositions. To intend to kill ten people is, in part, to be disposed to bring about the death of ten people. In contrast, to foresee something is to accurately believe that it will happen, but it needn't involve any disposition to bring it about. I might foresee that in thirty-eight years Halley's comet will be visible from the earth, but I might have no disposition to bring about the comet's visibility. It follows that, *ceteris paribus*, when you intentionally bring about a harm it manifests more of your dispositions than when you merely foresee a harm resulting from your actions. It manifests your intentions, as well as any of your other dispositions it would manifest anyway. With this in hand, we can explain why you usually have stronger reasons to avoid bringing about an intended harm than a merely foreseen harm. We do so with the Proactive Contact Principle. This principle says that you have reason to get in contact with good things and avoid contact with bad ones. So, you have reason to minimize your contact with bads. If you are more in contact with the harms you intentionally bring about than with those you foresee, by this principle you have weightier reason to avoid the former than the latter. We have an explanation of the Doctrine of the Double Effect: you usually have weightier reason to avoid bringing about intended harms than merely foreseen harms because, usually, you'll be in closer contact with the former than the latter.

When is the distinction between intending and foreseeing morally irrelevant? The Contact Account of the DDE suggests that, when  $p$  grounds  $q$ ,  $p$  and  $q$  are too close for the intending/foreseeing distinction to have moral import. In such a case, even if you merely foresaw  $q$ , bringing it about is just as bad as if you intended it. To see why this is, notice that the man's body being blown apart partially grounds his death. So, when you intended to blow the man up, you're in contact with his death. So by the Proactive Contact Principle, your relationship to his death is, morally speaking, the same as your relationship to something you straightforwardly intended. Although you don't intend the harm itself, grounding relationships put you in contact with it anyway. In sum, the Contact Account can explain why the intending/foreseeing distinction can matter in the first place and give a principled story about when exactly it does. It can explain the import of the distinction.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For classic discussions, see Foot (1967) and Quinn (1989).

<sup>22</sup> One can see our view here as giving a deeper account of the import of Wedgwood's "agential involvement" (Wedgwood 2011) and FitzPatrick's "constitution" (FitzPatrick 2006) to the DDE.

Commonsense morality, we think, admits a second principle of import to non-maleficence. We usually have weightier reason to avoid doing a harm than to avoid allowing it.<sup>23</sup> Imagine you and three strangers have been kidnapped. The kidnapper gives you a choice: you can either shoot one stranger, or they will shoot the other two. This is a difficult decision. We often seem to have weightier reason to avoid doing harm than to avoid merely allowing it to be done. The Contact Account can also shed light on this moral distinction. In many cases, that explanation proceeds in terms of the distinction between intending and foreseeing: if you shoot a stranger, you intend their death, whereas you don't intend the death of the two others if you allow them to be shot. The doing/allowing distinction matters in large part, we think, because it shadows the intending/foreseeing distinction. Yet we don't think this is the whole story. Harms done unintentionally sometimes seem at least a little worse than those allowed unintentionally. And harms done intentionally sometimes seem a little worse than those intentionally allowed. So we want to explain why the doing/allowing distinction might have some moral import independent of that between intending and foreseeing.

The key observation is that every harm takes a quite specific form. When someone is shot, their death is replete with concrete details: they died in a particular time and a particular manner. The bullet entered their body at a certain angle, it interrupted their bodily functionings in a certain way. When you shoot someone, more of your dispositions are manifest in these details than when you merely allow someone to be shot. You determine the exact time and manner of their death. These detailed facts ground the fact that they died. So, when you shoot someone, you're more in contact with their death than when you merely allow them to be shot. By the Proactive Contact Principle, one has reason to minimize one's contact with the bad. Therefore, one has weightier reason to avoid shooting someone than to avoid allowing someone to be shot. The point generalizes. When you do harm the details of the harm usually manifest your dispositions, and so you are in closer contact with a bad than when you merely allow harm. So, typically, you have somewhat weightier reason to avoid doing harm than to avoid allowing it.

Let's test this view with another case. Imagine you are racing a jeep in order to save five people from a rising ocean tide. There's not a moment to spare. In one case you hear that a single person also needs rescue from a landslide. It seems permissible not to rescue them. In a different case, that person is blocking your path to rescue the five. It is not permissible to run them over. This, some think, illustrates the fact that there's weightier reason to avoid doing harm (running someone over) than to avoid merely allowing it (not rescuing).<sup>24</sup> Can we explain that? We can. When you run someone over, you are in closer contact with the bad of their death than when you fail to rescue them. When you kill someone with a jeep, they die at a particular time and in a particular manner. You hit them at a certain speed and this mangles their body in a certain way. These are all manifestations of your dispositions—in this case, how you drive. When you leave someone to die in a landslide, the details grounding their death don't manifest much of your dispositions. You had (let's suppose) nothing to do with the manner or timing of the landslide. So again, when you do harm more of the details of the harm manifest your dispositions than when you merely allow harm.

Are there cases in which you're not in more contact with a harm you do than one you merely allow? Consider the following case. Imagine, by pushing a button, you cause someone's death. You have no idea who will die or how the button will cause their death. This is entirely the doing of whoever installed the button. In some versions of this case, plausibly you are not more in contact

<sup>23</sup> For this point, see Williams (1973). For more recent discussions, see e.g. Scheffler (2004) or Woollard (2015).

<sup>24</sup> For this case, lightly modified, see Foot (2002).

with the death when you push the button than when you merely allow someone else to push it. Your disconnection from the details of the death distances you from the death itself. In such cases, though, we doubt that doing harm must be worse than merely allowing harm to be done. Suppose, specifically, that either way the harm is intentional: you intend someone to die. In the case where you merely allow the button to be pushed, perhaps you would have pushed it yourself had they not pushed it first. Then we doubt you have weightier reason not to push the button than not to allow the button to be pushed. If our doubts are correct, that's evidence for our account of the moral significance of the doing/allowing distinction. When you aren't in closer contact with the details of a harm you do than one you merely allow, the significance of the distinction evaporates. The distinction matters because, and when, the details of harms you do manifest more of your dispositions than those you allow.

Let us reply to a worry about our explanations in these cases. These explanations rely on disputable claims about manifestation relationships. The worry is that these claims are only plausible if one already accepts the moral import of the doing and allowing distinction, and so cannot be used to help explain that distinction. We think this is incorrect: these claims about manifestation seem to us to be plausible regardless of one's normative views. But, more importantly, we take this to be a strength rather than a weakness of the Contact Account. This worry points to the fact that our descriptive judgements correlate with our moral judgements. If one is disinclined to think there's any metaphysical distinction, pertaining to manifestation, between shooting someone and letting someone be shot, one will be disinclined to think harming someone via the former is worse than via the latter (and vice versa). The Contact Account helps explain this correlation. This is part of a more general point. Throughout this paper, we've relied on claims about what manifests what. One might deny some of these claims. But if one does, we think one's moral judgements are also liable to change. The ability to explain these correlations is a virtue, not a vice, of the Contact Account of commonsense morality.

## 8 | OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

We've laid out an abductive argument for the Contact Account. We now want to explore and address six objections to the account.

The first objection targets our argument. We've said that we've provided a simple, unified account of a large swathe of non-consequentialist ethics. Yet we invoke a plurality of values: we've claimed that beauty, pain, injury, benevolence, moral saintliness and much else besides are values. One might worry, then, that we have not really unified anything at all. Our axiology, one might fret, is deeply disunified. In reply to this worry, we agree that our account of values is disunified. But we don't think that this is a comparative disadvantage of the Contact Account vis-à-vis serious alternative views. That's because everyone's picture of values should be disunified. Remember that a value is just something that grounds a reason. Intuitively there are many different things that ground reasons. The view that our reasons to feel awe in the face of the Grand Canyon and those to help children in need are grounded in the exact same kind of value is simply implausible. Reasons for awe or admiration or promotion or protection are often grounded in different kinds of values. So every extensionally adequate ethical theory should accept a disunified axiology.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is no special cost of our theory that it too recognizes a plurality of values. And nor does it mean

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, paradigmatic deontologists like Ross (2002[1930]), and most contemporary consequentialists (e.g. Railton 1984, 148–5; Brink 1989, 211–90) accept a pluralistic picture of practical values: the kind of values that ground reasons for actions.



the Contact Account has not unified anything. It has not unified the realm of value, but it has unified the realm of reasons. The pluralistic conception of morality holds that there are multiple entirely distinct domains of reasons. The Contact Account shows that all these domains can be reduced, in one way or another, to contact with value.

Let's look at a second objection. This objection asserts that the Contact Account cannot capture certain core features of commonsense morality. Specifically, our contact principles only tell you about the weight of your reasons. But commonsense morality is centrally about duties, or obligations, not just the weight of reasons. You have a *duty* to compensate those you harm, not just a weighty reason to do so. The worry is that the Contact Account fails to capture the core notion of duty in commonsense morality. To address this worry, let's start by stressing that it is not just a worry for the Contact Account. Every plausible view admits the existence of both reasons and duties, and so everyone needs an account of how they systematically relate. And everyone who thinks reasons are more fundamental than duties—who adopts a reasons-first view<sup>26</sup>—needs an account of how to explain duties in terms of reasons. There's an ongoing debate about these issues.<sup>27</sup> We believe one can pair the Contact Account with whatever view emerges as the most plausible from this debate.

We'll give an example. One plausible view, we think, 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.<sup>28</sup> This view relies on a distinction between moral and nonmoral reasons. One can understand this distinction in terms of different kinds of values: moral values ground moral reasons, nonmoral values ground nonmoral reasons.<sup>29</sup> To illustrate, suppose you can either donate your money to help someone in need, or use it to go to the cinema. If you donate your money, this will put you in contact with a moral good—the welfare of that person. So you have a moral reason to do so. If you go to the cinema, it will put you in contact with a nonmoral good—the pleasure you get from the movie. So you have a nonmoral reason to do that. In many such cases (we think) your moral reason to donate doesn't outweigh your nonmoral reason to go to the cinema. So you have no duty to donate. But in some such cases—perhaps if a small donation will save someone's life—your moral reason *will* outweigh your nonmoral reasons. And in these cases, you will have a duty to donate. Thus, the Contact Account, combined with a plausible account of how reasons ground obligations, captures moral duties perfectly well.

Let's turn to a third objection. One might admit that the Contact Account can generate duties, but doubt that it can generate *directed* duties. The idea here is that the core feature of commonsense morality is not just that you ought to compensate those you harm, repay your debts of gratitude, keep your promises and so on, but that you owe these behaviors to specific individuals. When you break a promise, you don't merely act wrongly, you wrong the person to whom

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Axiological pluralism is the norm, not the exception. For a form of pluralism that's especially similar to ours, see e.g. Anderson (1993, ch. 1).

<sup>26</sup> For an especially thorough exploration of this view, see e.g. Schroeder (2021).

<sup>27</sup> For more on this debate, see e.g. Portmore (2011, ch. 5), Snedegar (2016) and Schmidt (2023a; 2023b).

<sup>28</sup> This view is defended in de Kenessey (2023).

<sup>29</sup> One could, in turn, individuate different kinds of values through the different responses they render appropriate. Moral goodness makes moral approbation or admiration appropriate, beauty makes aesthetic appreciation appropriate, funniness makes amusement appropriate, and so on (see e.g. Anderson, 1993, ch. 1). Of course, one might doubt that there's a deep distinction between different kinds of values. But if there isn't, we think this second objection loses some of its sting. In that case, there's nothing distinctive about moral obligations. They boil down to general facts about what we ought to do. And we just need a story about how reasons ground such facts. For such a story, compatible with our view above, see e.g. Schmidt (2023b).

you made the promise. You had a directed duty to keep your promise to them, and you've violated that duty. We can see that in the fact that you must apologize to the person you broke the duty to, and they may fittingly resent you. They stand in a special normative position vis-à-vis you that they don't stand in with respect to other wrongdoers. Yet we've said nothing about directed duties in advancing the Contact Account. The concern is, thus, that the Contact Account cannot capture the directedness of commonsense moral duties.

We think the Contact Account can capture directed duties, provided one accepts some ancillary claims. For one, we suspect that what it is for one person to owe another some behavior is for them to occupy a specific normative position. I owe you some behavior when I have a duty to compensate you for not doing it, I should apologize to you for my inaction, it is fitting for you to resent me for my idleness, and so on. The Contact Account can help explain why wrongdoers are in this position vis-à-vis their victims. Take promise-breaking. When you break a promise to someone, you set back some of their interests—or at least so we've suggested. On the Contact Account, when you set back someone's interest you should compensate them. So the Contact Account can explain why promise-breakers should compensate their promisees. Additionally, on the Contact Account, it is plausible to think of an apology as an attempt to repair damage to a relationship. When you break a promise to someone you damage your relationship with them, and so you should apologize to them to repair it. So the account explains why promise-breakers should apologize to their promisees. Why is it fitting for these promisees to resent promise-breakers? Here we rely on an ancillary claim about fitting resentment: it is fitting to resent someone if they've wrongly set back your interests. Promise-breakers, according to the Contact Account, wrongly set back the promisees' interests, and so it is fitting to resent them. These points all generalize to other parts of commonsense morality. This shows that, at minimum, the Contact Account is compatible with the directedness of commonsense moral duties. More ambitiously, if the ancillary claims are plausible (as we think they are), the Contact Account can help explain that directedness.

Let's address some concerns about the contact principles themselves. One such worry concerns the role of your own good in morality. Suppose you can provide some benefit either to a stranger or to yourself. On commonsense morality, you're generally permitted to do either. You have sufficient reasons to benefit the stranger, or to benefit yourself. Yet, plausibly, you'll be in much closer contact with your own welfare, if you benefit yourself, than with the welfare of the stranger, if you benefit them. You're much more thoroughly affected by your own good than by the good of others. So one might think that the contact principles imply you ought—or have strictly most reason—to benefit yourself. More generally, one might worry that since you're in especially close contact with yourself, the Contact Account gives undue weight to egotistic considerations. It, falsely, implies you should generally act selfishly.

We think these considerations point to a feature, rather than a bug, of the Contact Account. Commonsense morality holds that you're often permitted to benefit yourself rather than strangers. The Contact Account, to its credit, explains why this is. Since you're in especially close contact with your own good, your good generates especially strong reasons for you (e.g. to preserve it). So you often have sufficient reason to benefit yourself rather than strangers—you have personal prerogatives. But, contrary to the worry, the contact principles don't imply that you *ought* to benefit yourself. To see this, recall a point from section 4. Generally, harms one consented to suffer are less impersonally bad than other harms. A boxer's suffering is less impersonally lamentable than an involuntary victim's suffering. Similarly, benefits one doesn't consent to receive, or agrees or accepts not to receive, are less impersonally good than other benefits. So, if you decline to consent to benefiting yourself, or agree or accept not to receive that benefit, you receiving the

benefit will be less impersonally good than the stranger receiving it. Thus, even if you are in closer contact with you yourself being benefited, the contact principles needn't say you have weightier reasons to benefit yourself than others. They don't imply you should generally act selfishly.

Let's consider a fifth objection. This worry swings on certain kinds of passive contact with the bad. By the Proactive Contact Principle, you have reason to avoid such contact. Yet you can, plausibly, acquire such contact merely by finding out what is going on in the world. Reading about bad events is, plausibly, a way to get into contact with those events. But, intuitively, we shouldn't avoid such passive contact with the bad. We shouldn't shut ourselves off from all the evil in the world. So, one might think, this aspect of the Contact Account is doubtful. To reply to this worry, we observe that although you have reason to shut yourselves off from the world, you have countervailing, usually weightier, reason to inform yourself about the world. This countervailing reason comes from two sources. On the one hand, it comes from the fact that willful ignorance, and especially willful moral ignorance, is a vice. It is a bad character trait to stick your head in the sand. Epistemically isolating yourself puts you in contact with this vice. So you have reason not to epistemically isolate yourself. On the other hand, the countervailing reason comes from the fact that you have reason to put yourself in contact with the good. When you help people, that puts you in contact with weighty goods. When you save someone's life you are in contact with the good of their continued existence. So you have reason to effectively help people. You cannot do that if you isolate yourself from the world's evils. Attempts to help, when done out of ignorance, are typically inefficacious. So you have reason to inform yourself. Thus, usually, you have weightier reason to learn about the world's evils than you do to shut yourself off from them.

The final objection hinges on the observation that, sometimes, one does bad things that are out of character. Imagine that you are a kind, gentle person. But you have a bad day, and you hurt someone needlessly. Their having been hurt doesn't manifest your deep character traits. Can we say, still their hurt has a special normative significance for you? That you antecedently had special reason not to hurt them and now have special reason to compensate them? We can. The key point is that your simple-but-fleeting dispositions coincide with more complicated, more stable dispositions. You might not generally have a disposition to hurt people needlessly. You wouldn't hurt people needlessly had you had a good day. But the fact that you did hurt someone needlessly means you have a disposition to do so when a very particular stimulus is in place: when the particular facets of your bad day are realized. This disposition is not so fleeting, and it manifested when you hurt someone. So you are in contact with their pain. Perhaps the simpler dispositions play a bigger role in grounding who you are because they are manifest more often, and so when you hurt someone in an in-character manner perhaps those hurts have more normative significance for you. But you are still in contact with values that manifest seemingly fleeting dispositions.

That address the most obvious challenges to the Contact Account. There are of course other objections to the account we might address. But one can reply to the most salient concerns about our picture. And a final comment is in order. We take the import of our project to be broader than the specific view we've defended. Even if our account of the relevant relationship—in terms of manifestation between you and a value—turns out to be untenable, our general idea of grounding morality on a specific special relation might remain plausible. So we hope that, in that case, the failure of the Contact Account can inspire future attempts at unifying morality in terms of a special relation.

## 9 | CONCLUSION

We have spelt out a unified account of compensation, gratitude, promises and non-maleficence. On our view, all these moral domains arise from the normative import of contact with value. And this account, we've shown, can illuminate various principles about how each domain works. That, to reiterate, provides abductive evidence for the account. The contact principles draw their main support from their explanatory power: they bring together a vast swathe of disparate moral phenomena into one ethical framework and draw plausibility from doing so. In this way, the Contact Account provides us with a unified, general and satisfactory account of compensation, gratitude, promises and non-malevolence. It may be obvious to the reader that our contact principles, and especially the Proactive Contact Principle, can also illuminate beneficence. We have reason to help other people because doing so puts us in contact with the good. In other work, we argue that contact with value also illuminates the normative import of interpersonal relationships, discounting and personal well-being. It explains why we should care more about our friends and family than about strangers, or more about temporally nearby events than events in the far future or past, and it furnishes us with an account of prudential reasons.<sup>30</sup> So, we think that contact with value might provide a quite comprehensive account of the normative domain. Yet spelling this out in depth is a project for another time.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Lovett and Riedener ([unpublished-a](#); [unpublished-b](#)).

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