



## Compassionate Moral Realism

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Compassionate Moral Realism**, by Marshall, Colin, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. xiii + 265, £45 (hardback).

‘Why be moral?’, asks the opening chapter of *Compassionate Moral Realism*, and by its end the book has provided an attractive answer: ‘because that is how people in touch with reality act.’ In between, Marshall explains step-by-step how he arrived there by thinking about ‘being in touch with reality’, and particularly being ‘in touch with’ other minds. The result is a meta-ethics that is naturalistic (the only entities needed are mental states), realist (moral claims are literally true and stance-independent), and resolutely about what, intuitively, it should be about—other people and how our actions affect them.

Let’s walk through how the book proceeds. The first two chapters present some historical views (from Plato, Wollaston, Schopenhauer, and Locke), which have various affinities with Marshall’s, particularly in trying to ground morality in epistemology. Although this discussion does an excellent job of contextualising Marshall’s project historically, it can be challenging for a reader, since all of these views differ from Marshall’s in major respects, so that it feels a bit like climbing a series of ladders, each of which is then kicked away.

A similar feeling attends chapters 3 and 4, which present the key notion of ‘being in touch’. Marshall’s central idea is that there is something valuable about experiences that both ‘present’ a real object and ‘reveal’ the nature of its properties, and that compassionate experiences are uniquely able to do this with the mental lives of others. To show that being in touch is not an *ad hoc* invention, but something with broad application, Marshall presents a sequence of examples where someone is, intuitively, in touch with something and is epistemically better-off for this.

The awkward thing is how many of these examples are ones in which, on the views of many or most philosophers, this intuitive sense of being in touch is mistaken. While these examples may illustrate what it *would* mean to be in touch, none provide clear cases where anyone actually *is* in touch. For instance, we are invited to intuit that Mary, famously seeing colour for the first time, has an epistemic good during that experience that she never had before. We are also invited to intuit that if Locke is right that spatial properties resemble our ideas of them but colours don’t, then spatial perception puts us in touch with reality but colour-perception does not. But if Locke is right, our intuition about Mary is false, and it might seem that if Einstein is right then our Lockean intuition is false, too.

Marshall recognizes this limitation in his examples, but suggests that this actually *strengthens* his view: if compassion is our only way of being in touch with anything outside us, that surely enhances its value. This is a fair point, but does little to assuage the worry that ‘being in touch’ might not carve reality at its epistemic joints.

Here is another worry about being in touch. When it is introduced through examples, we are told that someone who can see a room is in touch with its spatial properties in a way that someone who merely *knows* how the room is arranged is not—even if the latter person can form a vivid and accurate mental image of the room. Being in

touch, it seems, involves ‘presenting’ an object in the way that perception does and imagination does not.

But then we are told that memory can also involve presence, as contrasted with accurately imagining a past event based on knowledge of it. So does ‘anticipation’ of a future event, or ‘seeing’ a present event in the mind’s eye, again contrasted with mere accurate imaging. So, ‘presence’ isn’t what distinguishes perception from imagination, because all of these fall on the ‘imagination’ side of that distinction. Nor is ‘presence’ a matter of accuracy or confidence. Within the class of accurate, confident, imaginings, those in which the objects ‘just seem real’ (albeit past, future, or distant) have presence, while others do not.

The inordinate subtlety of this distinction reflects an underlying tension in Marshall’s view. On the one hand, he needs to show an epistemic superiority of compassion over non-compassionate responses to others, even those that still involve perspective-taking (such as the scheming of a skilled manipulator). To distinguish compassion from such ‘heartless’ perspective-taking, it helps to focus on the ‘immediacy’ of compassion, how it takes us out of ourselves and confronts us against our will with the concrete reality of others.

On the other hand, Marshall can’t confine the epistemic good of compassion to direct perception. The perfectly compassionate person shouldn’t ignore the future for the present, or distant people for whoever happens to be in front of them. But this requires *downplaying* the immediacy of compassion, making it harder to maintain the clear distinction between compassion and heartless perspective-taking. Marshall’s distinction between imagination with, and imagination without, ‘presence’ is a valiant attempt to reconcile these competing demands, whether or not one shares his intuition of an epistemic difference.

Marshall then makes his central move: when we share in another’s pleasure, suffering, or desire (which he calls ‘compassion’, noting that ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy’ would also fit) we have an experience that both presents the other and reveals the nature of their experience. Over chapters 5 to 9, compassion’s scope is steadily extended: although we may feel compassion most readily with people immediately around us, it can extend as far as we can represent, to future, past, distant, or merely possible situations. This culminates in chapter 10, which presents Marshall’s answer to ‘why be moral?’—namely, that ‘only good people can perceive sentient creatures as they really are, whereas selfish and indifferent people cannot fully face reality’ [157].

One issue is that the discussion here largely proceeds as though ‘compassion’ is had, or is lacked, only as a whole. This makes sense if the ‘amoralist’ being addressed is a pure egoist, with time for nobody except themselves. But what if the addressee cares deeply about a few particular people but happily butchers others? It doesn’t seem that this kind of ‘selectively’ compassionate agent is worse off, epistemically, than someone who tries to extend compassion to everyone, given that neither can come anywhere close to feeling full compassion for all of the other minds in the world. Indeed, selectively compassionate agents might have more and richer compassionate feelings, because they can focus on people who are similar to them and easy to make happy. This might make their compassionate experiences easy and rewarding, compared to the compassionate pains to which one exposes oneself by committing to consistent solidarity with the worst-off.

Marshall can respond to this sort of objection by appealing to *structure*: by being, say, twice as motivated to promote two people’s happiness as I am to promote a single person’s happiness, I am in touch with the structural relation between the sum of

their happinesses and each part. The conscientious universalist is more in touch with this structure than the selectively compassionate person is. But this response, it seems to me, is vulnerable to the same objection: there are indefinitely many structural facts about the relations among different people's varied and diverse sorts of happiness. Nobody can be in touch with all of these, but monstrous people could do as well as anyone else if they calibrate their motivations and affective reactions carefully to track the relations among all of the different precise sorts of good and bad things that might befall their loved ones.

Ultimately, this reflects the *kind* of good that being in touch is. It is like the good of learning: there are many things to learn about, so it is perfectly reasonable for me to study one topic, and to use that to explain why I don't spend time studying another topic. This contrasts with, say, the requirement to believe what your evidence says. If I have evidence that  $p$ , I should believe that  $p$ —*whether or not* I have on other occasions believed what my evidence supported, or not. It makes no sense to say that, because I have already believed many things supported by evidence, I am free to believe not- $p$  even though there is clear evidence that  $p$ . This kind of epistemic obligation cannot be traded-off, whereas epistemic goods like knowing more and being in touch can.

This tension challenges any compassion-based morality: whatever value compassion itself has, it must allow for trading-off, since we cannot empathise in detail with everyone. At some point, it must be acceptable to say 'I have put myself in enough shoes, no more compassionate feelings today'—but not to then say 'so I won't bother to respect others' rights until tomorrow.'


Marshall recognises this structural disconnection between morality and compassion, which is where chapters 11 to 14 enter. These offer a definition of moral claims in terms of bringing about things with objective value, which in turn is defined in terms of 'things which anyone in touch with would desire'. Since compassion is the only way to be in touch with mental states, valenced mental states neatly turn out to be objectively valuable. And thus truisms like 'it is morally wrong to cause unnecessary pain' are vindicated.

This lets us *morally* condemn the selectively compassionate person: such a person causes unnecessary suffering, which is objectively bad, because anyone who was in touch with it would be averse to it. Conversely, someone who helps others is morally good, because she promotes something (happiness) that anyone in touch with would like. These moral evaluations are unaffected by what the agents are *actually* in touch with.

But this might loosen the connection between moral and epistemic evaluations *too much*. Morality is defined by reference to being in touch, but this definition is completely independent of part I's argument that being in touch is an irreplaceable epistemic good. We could define morality in this way even if being in touch was valueless, and could make all of the same moral judgments. This means that part II's answer to 'why be moral?', and part III's definition of morality, despite both of these relating to being in touch, are actually independent of one another.

In sum, *Compassionate Moral Realism* takes two familiar ideas—that morality is founded in the experience of compassion, and that moral people grasp reality better than immoral people do—and attempts a novel synthesis, arguing that compassionate feelings are key to grasping some parts of reality. It is not entirely clear whether the book's central notion—'being in touch'—is robust enough to do the work assigned to it. Nor is it entirely clear whether it succeeds in reconciling the universality of moral

obligation with the limitations of actual compassion. But it is a bold and daring attempt to wrestle with the challenges that face any metaethics based on compassion, and it is thoroughly recommended reading for anyone interested in the prospects of such a view.

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