

Draft - please cite the version in *The Journal of Moral Philosophy*, when available

Colin Marshall, *Compassionate Moral Realism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 265 pages. ISBN: 9780198809685. Hardback: \$60.00.

Colin Marshall's ambitious book seeks to answer the foundational questions of both normative ethics (why ought we be moral?) and metaethics (what is the nature of morality?) at once. The book exhibits enormous argumentative and even historical complexity. In the course of presenting his case, Marshall develops and defends an imperatival account of the content of pain experiences, an account of compassion modeled on the early modern theory that ideas resemble their objects, the irreplaceability and epistemic goodness of being in touch in this way, not to mention an understanding of realism and objectivity to undergird his naturalistic metaethical conclusions.

Marshall's answer to the "why be moral" question is that we have reason to be moral because being moral partly involves *being in touch* with certain aspects of reality, and being in touch is an irreplaceable epistemic good. Marshall's distinctive account of "being in touch" is the core of his view. According to Marshall, an agent, *S*, is in touch with a property, *P*, of an object, *O*, just in case *O* has *P* and *S* has a representation of *O* in which *O* is phenomenologically given and *P* is revealed to *S*. (p. 47). To motivate the claim that there is such a distinctive (and irreplaceable) three-place relation between an experiential subject, object, and property, Marshall appeals to cases (pp. 48-53). For example, he considers iterations of a hypothetical case in which a sighted person has test-passing propositional knowledge of a building's layout. If she loses her sight, she loses something that a seeing person without prior propositional knowledge has, namely, being in touch with the building's layout. Suppose such a person then gains new abilities—first, increased sensitivity to sound that allows her to make reliable (propositional) inferences about nearby objects; second, "flash sonar," an ability that seems to produce perception-like experiences of one's surrounding. Marshall invites us to see that there is something distinctively good and irreplaceable about the latter ability that involves not just knowing about certain properties, but being in touch with them.

According to Marshall, compassionate reactions are a way of being in touch in the above sense—they are a way of having a representation of a fellow creature (the object) who is suffering (the property), in which representation the creature is phenomenologically given and the suffering is revealed (pp. 62-81). Marshall defends an account according to which pain experiences are *imperatival*. To experience your own foot in pain is to experience a command with a subject and an object (in this case, yourself and the pain in your foot). On this model, we can think of a *compassionate reaction to another's pain* as the experience of the very same imperative—just as your pain tells you, "Stop this!", so my compassionate reaction to your pain tells me to "Stop this!", where "this" in both cases refers to the pain in your foot (p. 78). It is in this way that compassionate reactions are not just appropriate, fitting, or worthy of some other normative desideratum, but are quite literally *accurate*—they represent a part of reality as it really is. Without such a reaction, you might *know* that a person is in pain, and even know that you ought to prevent their pain, but you will not thereby be in touch with their pain. And so there is an epistemic good (accurately representing reality) that non-compassionate persons lack.

Marshall builds on his core account in a variety of ways that address the complexities of the moral domain. For example, he argues that an object can be given in

representation, and a property revealed, even at a spatial and/or temporal distance (pp. 92-97). He also seeks to accommodate the intuitive notion that one can be in touch to a greater or lesser degree with the experiences of others. Consider two people who are in touch with two unequally intense headaches, but only one of them prefers to alleviate the more intense headache. Marshall argues, quite plausibly, that this person is *better* in touch—not with one of them in particular, but with *the two of them together* (p. 119).

In the metaethical portion of the book, Marshall lays out some criteria for moral realism and argues that CMR fits those criteria. Those criteria are:

1. At least some moral claims are literally true (the semantic criterion)
2. At least some moral facts are stance-independent (the metaphysical criterion)
3. There is at least some epistemic asymmetry between the virtuous and the vicious (the epistemic criterion) (p. 183)

One of the strengths of Marshall's overall project is how it tightly links the moral and the metaethical domains—notice that his answer to the “why be moral” question in turn satisfies the epistemic criterion for realism. The other two criteria are satisfied in virtue of an account of objective badness. Marshall defends a sufficient condition for objective badness according to which something is objectively bad if any subject who was in touch with it would feel averse to it (p. 186). If this is right, then *at least one* kind of objective badness is plausibly related to being in touch. Moreover, Marshall understands objectivity itself as involving objects themselves setting the standards for how subjects ought to react to them (p. 188). This account can explain, for example, why raw kale's pleasantness is subjective whereas its temperature is objective. Nothing in raw kale privileges a “gross!” rather than a “yum” reaction, whereas its being room temperature determines the inaccuracy of thinking it's hotter than the room (p. 188). When this account of objective badness is conjoined with an account of pain according to which some pains are such that anyone in touch with them would feel averse to them, it follows that it is literally true *that some pain is objectively bad*—and this provides the materials for accommodating the semantic and metaphysical criteria for realism.

Marshall closes his book with a series of rich and insightful contributions to debates over motivation internalism, evolutionary debunking, and a few other contemporary controversies in metaethics. Philosophers working in all of these areas should take note of Marshall's work.

I worry that Marshall's answer to the “why be moral” question gets things backwards in a particular way. We're invited to see that an essential part of being moral—having compassionate reactions to suffering—constitutes an epistemic good, being in touch. If someone asks why be moral, Marshall answers that in being so they will acquire an epistemic good. Yet not all epistemic goods are worth having. I could have a cognitive faculty that makes me acutely aware of the number of stars in far away galaxies, or that makes me acutely aware of the number of blades of grass on my lawn. I do not have much reason to desire these epistemic goods, whereas I do have good reason to want the epistemic good of compassion. What's the difference? The epistemic good of being in touch with suffering is important precisely because it is *morally* important. If being in touch with suffering derives its importance from moral value, then it's odd to defend the rationality of caring about moral value by appeal to the value of being in touch. Perhaps knowledge about how many blades of grass are on my lawn is intrinsically valuable, But an answer to “Why be moral?” must not just give any old

reason—or appeal to any old non-moral good—for being moral. It must give a reason that has at least a fighting chance to live up to the importance of morality in a non-circular manner. My worry is that the plausibility of Marshall’s answer to the question borrows its force from very normative sphere he is trying to justify.

There is an important caveat to my point: it’s plausible that Marshall’s answer is the best that one can ultimately do. I, certainly, can do no better. Perhaps ever answer to the question “Why be moral?” will *either* illegitimately borrow its force from morality *or* will fall short of matching morality’s importance. Moreover, even if my criticism is cogent, Marshall’s answer is still illuminating. Much more can be said in favor of a view according to which being good involves seeing the world as it really is and failing to be good involves a kind of perceptual failure. This line of inquiry, which fits especially well with virtue-theoretical conceptions in normative ethics and realist perspectives in metaethics, is plenty valuable even if it doesn’t provide a satisfying reason to be moral in the first place.

Marshall’s book is an impressive achievement. Not only is it a case study in how philosophers can make contemporary use of seemingly disparate historical material (his use of the early modern theory of ideas in defending his epistemological account of compassion is especially impressive), but it brings together novel argumentation spanning topics large and small across both normative and metaethics.

Joshua Blanchard  
Oakland University  
jblanchard@oakland.edu