Karen Stohr, *Minding the Gap: Moral Ideals and Moral Improvement* (Oxford: Oxford
    University Press, 2019), 276 pages. ISBN: 9780190867522. Hardback: $65.00.

Recent work on moral improvement has aimed to give psychologically plausi-
ble accounts of how we might become better. Karen Stohr's book contributes
to this on-going discussion by giving us realistic ways to 'close the gap' between
where we currently are at and who we want to become.

Stohr intends her project to be for those of us who care about being morally
good, but also find ourselves falling short. This process of moral improvement
involves not just closing the gap, but continually discovering what our ideal
moral self is. Stohr proposes that both processes – identifying our aspirational
moral identities and moving closer to them – are social projects that take place
within "moral neighborhoods" where we are held to certain norms by others,
enabling us to enact our fictive aspirational moral selves.

In Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, Stohr outlines the gap between where we are
and who we want to be, given our own moral ideals. Chapter 1 sets out the
boundaries of the project, as Stohr highlights that she will not be arguing for a
particular set of normative ideals, but that her account of moral improvement
is to be practical in nature, observing that we will only move towards moral
ideals if they are the "ideal[s] I hold up for myself and what I take my own
moral situation to be" (p. 25). Yet, that this project is a practical endeavor does
not mean that it is individualist in nature, for "we do not identify and cultivate
our moral ideals in a vacuum" (ibid), as "other people influence both my moral
identity and my ability to inhabit it successfully" (p. 29).

Given that our own moral improvement is to be practical in nature, it must
be one that we can do; in other words, it must be psychologically plausible.
In Chapter 2, Stohr brings forth limitations of our own psychology, detailing
how they threaten the pursuit of our moral ideals. These limitations involve
(i) ignorance about our own deficiencies and motivations, making it diffi-
cult to assess where we are along the spectrum of moral improvement, and
(ii) failures in self-reflection, threatening the existence of a moral self. The
challenge, then, is to provide a realistic account of moral improvement that
can overcome these obstacles.

Over the next five chapters, Stohr develops her account of moral improve-
ment, beginning with task of cultivating an aspirational moral identity, which
she suggests is bootstrapped out of the practical and social identities we
inhabit. It is by being a mother, sibling, or teacher that we identify with cer-
tain norms and expectations. Importantly, though, the moral identities we
cultivate are aspirational, providing for us an image of who we want to be,
and so in some sense, are fictive, since "we have not yet achieved [them]"

(p. 93). However, they are *ours* in another sense, since "we identify with them as who we 'really' are." (ibid). This process, though, cannot successfully be done by an individual, for we will likely fall prey to the limitations Stohr rightfully brings to our attention in Chapter 2. Overcoming these obstacles will be a social endeavor, carried out within moral neighborhoods – or social contexts with particular norms and conventions – such as friendship, the classroom, or even an airplane cabin mid-flight. Moral neighborhoods enable us to "work out our moral ideals by providing imaginative insight into who we might be" (p. 105); the moral neighborhood of friendship, for example, allows me to adopt my friend's perspectives and expectations, and have her hold me into these expectations. This will involve a certain amount of 'performance' which, while it "does not reflect my actual feelings in the moment; it does reflect my deeper commitments" (p. 155). Stohr argues we are to put on a "moral front" in order to act in accordance to who we are "deep down," which creates the space for us to enact and move towards our aspirational selves.

After laying out her account, the final chapters of the book address three social practices that help maintain effective moral neighborhoods: (i) self-deprecation, (ii) behaving agreeably, and (iii) putting up the veil of philanthropy. Self-deprecation can "function to restore and affirm equality in circumstances where it has been destabilized" (p. 173), while being agreeable can help us "exemplify and express moral ideals such as respect, compassion, and attentiveness to the needs of others, especially those who are the most vulnerable" (p. 193). Lastly, throwing up the veil of philanthropy enables us to form charitable narratives about others actions and motivations, whereby we then "us[e] those narratives to shape our interactions" (p. 217).

This summary fails to give due diligence to the numerous insights that Stohr has to offer. Nonetheless, I suggest that Stohr's proposal is incomplete, for an account of moral improvement should not just involve fictive aspirational moral identities, but also fictive vicious identities. I give two reasons for this.

First, recall that Stohr proposes that we move towards the better version of ourselves by inhabiting fictive aspirational moral identities. The use of both positive and negative exemplars can help us navigate this process, for they are "a way of illustrating what a morally good (or not so good) life would look like" (p. 88). And, once we discern what the ins and outs of a good life looks like for us, practically speaking, we can then put on this fictive, or not yet realized identity, as a way to increasingly approximate it. To illustrate, Stohr gives the case of a smoker who "imagine[s] himself as a non-smoker in effort to quit smoking ... [whereby] a person takes on an identity as form of a strategy for realizing it." (p. 91).

But, just as positive exemplars provide us an image of what we might aspire towards, negative exemplars can be of help, making salient to us a fictive, or not fully actualized, vicious self: The smoker might be motivated by imagining himself as a non-smoker, but he might also be moved by seeing himself as a lung cancer patient. In a similar vein, there is something sobering about events like the Nazi Holocaust or the empirical findings of the Milgram Experiments – perhaps what strikes us is that seemingly moral people are capable of committing rather heinous acts, and we realize that we could do such evil too.

Psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius observe that our own self-concepts play an important part in motivation and behavior regulation, and go on to argue that our self-concepts are not only positively valenced ones, but negative ones as well. Within the domain of our possible selves, there are both our ideal selves – "the selves we would very much like to become" (Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). "Possible selves." *American Psychologist, 41*(9), 954–969, p. 954) – as well as "the selves we are afraid of becoming" (ibid). These fictive, or possible, selves can motivate us – both in striving towards our ideal self and taking steps to avoid our feared, or vicious self (ibid, pp. 960–961).

In short, moral improvement might not just be about striving for virtue, but fleeing from vice. And this requires a sobering confrontation with the reality of moral failing that potentially lies within us.

Second, assuming that Stohr is correct in claiming that social infrastructure is crucial for moral improvement, we will not only need others to hold us to our fictive aspirational selves, but will also need others to keep us from falling into our fictive vicious selves. The worry is that if others only know us in terms of our aspirational identities, then falling short of such identities can lead to counterproductive cognitive and behavioral tendencies, such as those arising from shame. This may make it more difficult to garner the social support that is needed, and instead lead to social isolation and further detrimental pretense. For instance, those who fail to effectively cope with substance use often first attempt to hide their struggles and end up living in shame and isolation, only making matters worse. Consider the following personal testimony found within the Alcoholics Anonymous' handbook: "I was … ashamed of myself … I was terrified of being found out. I knew that if others found out who I really was, they wouldn't like me and I would be left alone, worthless and alone" (Alcoholics Anonymous. (2001). *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.). New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, p. 423). An essential component to the Alcoholics Anonymous recovery program is admitting that one has a problem. This is made explicit through the introductions members make: "Hi, my name is _____, and I am an alcoholic." Ironically, it is by revealing

the part of one's self that one has previously tried to cover with a moral front that moral improvement can begin to occur.

Thus, while Stohr's proposal rightly emphasizes the importance that putting on a fictive, aspirational moral self can play, we should also recognize the need to acknowledge our fictive vicious selves. We not only need to recognize how high we might aspire, but how low we are capable of falling. Importantly, social support and infrastructure are crucial to both endeavors. Thus, we must be wary of how falling short of our aspirational moral selves can cause shame, prompting us to hide ourselves from those whom we need most.[1]

Maria Waggoner
Department of Philosophy, Washington University, Saint Louis, MO, United States
maria.waggoner0522@gmail.com